The Gambler

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I

At length I returned from two weeks leave of absence to find that my patrons had arrived three days ago in Roulettenberg. I received from them a welcome quite different to that which I had expected. The General eyed me coldly, greeted me in rather haughty fashion, and dismissed me to pay my respects to his sister. It was clear that from somewhere money had been acquired. I thought I could even detect a certain shamefacedness in the General's glance. Maria Philipovna, too, seemed

distraught, and conversed with me with an air of detachment. Nevertheless, she took the money which I handed to her, counted it, and listened to what I had to tell. To luncheon there were expected that day a Monsieur Mezentsov, a French lady, and an Englishman; for, whenever money was in hand, a banquet in Muscovite style was always given. Polina Alexandrovna, on seeing me, inquired why I had been so long away. Then, without waiting for an answer, she departed. Evidently this was not mere accident, and I felt that I must throw some light upon matters. It was high time that I did so.

I was assigned a small room on the fourth floor of the hotel (for you must know that I belonged to the General's suite). So far as I could see, the party had already gained some notoriety in the place, which had come to look upon the General as a Russian nobleman of great wealth. Indeed, even before luncheon he charged me, among other things, to get two thousand-franc notes changed for him at the hotel counter, which put us in a position to be thought millionaires at all events for a week! Later, I was about to take Mischa and Nadia for a walk when a summons reached me from the staircase that I must attend the General. He began by deigning to inquire of me where I was going to take the children; and as he did so, I could see that he failed to look me in the eyes. He wanted to do so, but each time was met by me with such a fixed, disrespectful stare that he desisted in confusion. In pompous language, however, which jumbled one sentence into another, and at length grew disconnected, he gave me to understand that I was to lead the children altogether away from the Casino, and out into the park. Finally his anger exploded, and he added sharply:

"I suppose you would like to take them to the Casino to play roulette? Well, excuse my speaking so plainly, but I know how addicted you are to gambling. Though I am not your mentor, nor wish to be, at least I have a right to require that you shall not actually compromise me."

"I have no money for gambling," I quietly replied.

"But you will soon be in receipt of some," retorted the General, reddening a little as he dived into his writing desk and applied himself to a memorandum book. From it he saw that he had 120 roubles of mine in his keeping.

“Let us calculate,” he went on. “We must translate these roubles into thalers. Here—take 100 thalers, as a round sum. The rest will be safe in my hands.”

In silence I took the money.

“You must not be offended at what I say,” he continued. “You are too touchy about these things. What I have said I have said merely as a warning. To do so is no more than my right.”

When returning home with the children before luncheon, I met a cavalcade of our party riding to view some ruins. Two splendid carriages, magnificently horsed, with Mlle. Blanche, Maria Philipovna, and Polina Alexandrovna in one of them, and the Frenchman, the Englishman, and the General in attendance on horseback! The passers-by stopped to stare at them, for the effect was splendid—the General could not have improved upon it. I calculated that, with the 4000 francs which I had brought with me, added to what my patrons seemed already to have acquired, the party must be in possession of at least 7000 or 8000 francs—though that would be none too much for Mlle. Blanche, who, with her mother and the Frenchman, was also lodging in our hotel. The latter gentleman was called by the lacqueys “Monsieur le Comte,” and Mlle. Blanche’s mother was dubbed “Madame la Comtesse.” Perhaps in very truth they were “Comte et Comtesse.”

I knew that “Monsieur le Comte” would take no notice of me when we met at dinner, as also that the General would not dream of introducing us, nor of recommending me to the “Comte.” However, the latter had lived awhile in Russia, and knew that the person referred to as an “uchitel” is never looked upon as a bird of fine feather. Of course, strictly speaking, he knew me; but I was an uninvited guest at the luncheon—the General had forgotten to arrange otherwise, or I should have been dispatched to dine at the table d’hôte. Nevertheless, I presented myself in such guise that the General looked at me with a touch of approval; and, though the good Maria Philipovna was for showing me my place, the fact of my having previously met the Englishman, Mr. Astley, saved me, and thenceforward I figured as one of the company.

This strange Englishman I had met first in Prussia, where we had happened to sit vis-à-vis in a railway train in which I was travelling to overtake our party; while, later, I had run across him in France, and again in Switzerland—twice within the space of two weeks! To think, therefore, that I should suddenly encounter him again here, in Roulettenberg! Never in my life had I known a more retiring man, for he was shy to the pitch of imbecility, yet well aware of the fact (for he was no fool). At the same time, he was a gentle, amiable sort of an individual, and, even on our first encounter in Prussia I had contrived to draw him out, and he had told me that he had just been to the North Cape, and was now anxious to visit the fair at Nizhni Novgorod. How he had come to make the General's acquaintance I do not know, but, apparently, he was much struck with Polina. Also, he was delighted that I should sit next him at table, for he appeared to look upon me as his bosom friend.

During the meal the Frenchman was in great feather: he was discursive and pompous to every one. In Moscow too, I remembered, he had blown a great many bubbles. Interminably he discoursed on finance and Russian politics, and though, at times, the General made feints to contradict him, he did so humbly, and as though wishing not wholly to lose sight of his own dignity.

For myself, I was in a curious frame of mind. Even before luncheon was half finished I had asked myself the old, eternal question: "Why do I continue to dance attendance upon the General, instead of having left him and his family long ago?" Every now and then I would glance at Polina Alexandrovna, but she paid me no attention; until eventually I became so irritated that I decided to play the boor.

First of all I suddenly, and for no reason whatever, plunged loudly and gratuitously into the general conversation. Above everything I wanted to pick a quarrel with the Frenchman; and, with that end in view I turned to the General, and exclaimed in an overbearing sort of way—indeed, I think that I actually interrupted him—that that summer it had been almost impossible for a Russian to dine anywhere at tables d'hôte. The General bent upon me a glance of astonishment.

“If one is a man of self-respect,” I went on, “one risks abuse by so doing, and is forced to put up with insults of every kind. Both at Paris and on the Rhine, and even in Switzerland—there are so many Poles, with their sympathisers, the French, at these tables d’hôte that one cannot get a word in edgeways if one happens only to be a Russian.”

This I said in French. The General eyed me doubtfully, for he did not know whether to be angry or merely to feel surprised that I should so far forget myself.

“Of course, one always learns something everywhere,” said the Frenchman in a careless, contemptuous sort of tone.

“In Paris, too, I had a dispute with a Pole,” I continued, “and then with a French officer who supported him. After that a section of the Frenchmen present took my part. They did so as soon as I told them the story of how once I threatened to spit into Monsignor’s coffee.”

“To spit into it?” the General inquired with grave disapproval in his tone, and a stare, of astonishment, while the Frenchman looked at me unbelievingly.

“Just so,” I replied. “You must know that, on one occasion, when, for two days, I had felt certain that at any moment I might have to depart for Rome on business, I repaired to the Embassy of the Holy See in Paris, to have my passport visaed. There I encountered a sacristan of about fifty, and a man dry and cold of mien. After listening politely, but with great reserve, to my account of myself, this sacristan asked me to wait a little. I was in a great hurry to depart, but of course I sat down, pulled out a copy of L’Opinion Nationale, and fell to reading an extraordinary piece of invective against Russia which it happened to contain. As I was thus engaged I heard some one enter an adjoining room and ask for Monsignor; after which I saw the sacristan make a low bow to the visitor, and then another bow as the visitor took his leave. I ventured to remind the good man of my own business also; whereupon, with an expression of, if anything, increased dryness, he again asked me to wait. Soon a third visitor arrived who, like myself, had come on business (he was an Austrian of some sort); and as

soon as ever he had stated his errand he was conducted upstairs! This made me very angry. I rose, approached the sacristan, and told him that, since Monsignor was receiving callers, his lordship might just as well finish off my affair as well. Upon this the sacristan shrunk back in astonishment. It simply passed his understanding that any insignificant Russian should dare to compare himself with other visitors of Monsignor's! In a tone of the utmost effrontery, as though he were delighted to have a chance of insulting me, he looked me up and down, and then said: "Do you suppose that Monsignor is going to put aside his coffee for you?" But I only cried the louder: "Let me tell you that I am going to spit into that coffee! Yes, and if you do not get me my passport visaed this very minute, I shall take it to Monsignor myself."

"What? While he is engaged with a Cardinal?" screeched the sacristan, again shrinking back in horror. Then, rushing to the door, he spread out his arms as though he would rather die than let me enter.

Thereupon I declared that I was a heretic and a barbarian—"Je suis hérétique et barbare," I said, "and that these archbishops and cardinals and monsignors, and the rest of them, meant nothing at all to me. In a word, I showed him that I was not going to give way. He looked at me with an air of infinite resentment. Then he snatched up my passport, and departed with it upstairs. A minute later the passport had been visaed! Here it is now, if you care to see it,"—and I pulled out the document, and exhibited the Roman visa.

"But—" the General began.

"What really saved you was the fact that you proclaimed yourself a heretic and a barbarian," remarked the Frenchman with a smile. "Cela n'était pas si bête."

"But is that how Russian subjects ought to be treated? Why, when they settle here they dare not utter even a word—they are ready even to deny the fact that they are Russians! At all events, at my hotel in Paris I received far more attention from the company after I had told them about the fracas with the sacristan. A fat Polish nobleman, who had been the most offensive of all who were present at the table

d'hôte, at once went upstairs, while some of the Frenchmen were simply disgusted when I told them that two years ago I had encountered a man at whom, in 1812, a French 'hero' fired for the mere fun of discharging his musket. That man was then a boy of ten and his family are still residing in Moscow."

"Impossible!" the Frenchman spluttered. "No French soldier would fire at a child!"

"Nevertheless the incident was as I say," I replied. "A very respected ex-captain told me the story, and I myself could see the scar left on his cheek."

The Frenchman then began chattering volubly, and the General supported him; but I recommended the former to read, for example, extracts from the memoirs of General Perovski, who, in 1812, was a prisoner in the hands of the French. Finally Maria Philipovna said something to interrupt the conversation. The General was furious with me for having started the altercation with the Frenchman. On the other hand, Mr. Astley seemed to take great pleasure in my brush with Monsieur, and, rising from the table, proposed that we should go and have a drink together. The same afternoon, at four o'clock, I went to have my customary talk with Polina Alexandrovna; and, the talk soon extended to a stroll. We entered the Park, and approached the Casino, where Polina seated herself upon a bench near the fountain, and sent Nadia away to a little distance to play with some other children. Mischa also I dispatched to play by the fountain, and in this fashion we—that is to say, Polina and myself—contrived to find ourselves alone.

Of course, we began by talking on business matters. Polina seemed furious when I handed her only 700 gülden, for she had thought to receive from Paris, as the proceeds of the pledging of her diamonds, at least 2000 gülden, or even more.

"Come what may, I must have money," she said. "And get it somehow I will—otherwise I shall be ruined."

I asked her what had happened during my absence.

“Nothing; except that two pieces of news have reached us from St. Petersburg. In the first place, my grandmother is very ill, and unlikely to last another couple of days. We had this from Timothy Petrovitch himself, and he is a reliable person. Every moment we are expecting to receive news of the end.”

“All of you are on the tiptoe of expectation?” I queried.

“Of course—all of us, and every minute of the day. For a year-and-a-half now we have been looking for this.”

“Looking for it?”

“Yes, looking for it. I am not her blood relation, you know—I am merely the General’s step-daughter. Yet I am certain that the old lady has remembered me in her will.”

“Yes, I believe that you will come in for a good deal,” I said with some assurance.

“Yes, for she is fond of me. But how come you to think so?”

I answered this question with another one. “That Marquis of yours,” I said, “—is he also familiar with your family secrets?”

“And why are you yourself so interested in them?” was her retort as she eyed me with dry grimness.

“Never mind. If I am not mistaken, the General has succeeded in borrowing money of the Marquis.”

“It may be so.”

“Is it likely that the Marquis would have lent the money if he had not known something or other about your grandmother? Did you notice, too, that three times during luncheon, when speaking of her, he called her ‘La Baboulenka’?[1]. What loving, friendly behaviour, to be sure!”

[1] Dear little Grandmother.

“Yes, that is true. As soon as ever he learnt that I was likely to inherit something from her he began to pay me his addresses. I thought you ought to know that.”

“Then he has only just begun his courting? Why, I thought he had been doing so a long while!”

“You know he has not,” retorted Polina angrily. “But where on earth did you pick up this Englishman?” She said this after a pause.

“I knew you would ask about him!” Whereupon I told her of my previous encounters with Astley while travelling.

“He is very shy,” I said, “and susceptible. Also, he is in love with you.”

“Yes, he is in love with me,” she replied.

“And he is ten times richer than the Frenchman. In fact, what does the Frenchman possess? To me it seems at least doubtful that he possesses anything at all.”

“Oh, no, there is no doubt about it. He does possess some château or other. Last night the General told me that for certain. Now are you satisfied?”

“Nevertheless, in your place I should marry the Englishman.”

“And why?” asked Polina.

“Because, though the Frenchman is the handsomer of the two, he is also the baser; whereas the Englishman is not only a man of honour, but ten times the wealthier of the pair.”

“Yes? But then the Frenchman is a marquis, and the cleverer of the two,” remarked Polina imperturbably.

“Is that so?” I repeated.

“Yes; absolutely.”

Polina was not at all pleased at my questions; I could see that she was doing her best to irritate me with the brusquerie of her answers. But I took no notice of this.

“It amuses me to see you grow angry,” she continued. “However, inasmuch as I allow you to indulge in these questions and conjectures, you ought to pay me something for the privilege.”

“I consider that I have a perfect right to put these questions to you,” was my calm retort; “for the reason that I am ready to pay for them, and also care little what becomes of me.”

Polina giggled.

“Last time you told me—when on the Shlangenberg—that at a word from me you would be ready to jump down a thousand feet into the abyss. Some day I may remind you of that saying, in order to see if you will be as good as your word. Yes, you may depend upon it that I shall do so. I hate you because I have allowed you to go to such lengths, and I also hate you and still more—because you are so necessary to me. For the time being I want you, so I must keep you.”

Then she made a movement to rise. Her tone had sounded very angry. Indeed, of late her talks with me had invariably ended on a note of temper and irritation—yes, of real temper.

“May I ask you who is this Mlle. Blanche?” I inquired (since I did not wish Polina to depart without an explanation).

“You know who she is—just Mlle. Blanche. Nothing further has transpired. Probably she will soon be Madame General—that is to say, if the rumours that Grandmamma is nearing her end should prove true. Mlle. Blanche, with her mother and her cousin, the Marquis, know very well that, as things now stand, we are ruined.”

“And is the General at last in love?”

“That has nothing to do with it. Listen to me. Take these 700 florins, and go and play roulette with them. Win as much for me as you can, for I am badly in need of money.”

So saying, she called Nadia back to her side, and entered the Casino, where she joined the rest of our party. For myself, I took, in musing astonishment, the first path to the left. Something had seemed to strike my brain when she told me to go and play roulette. Strangely enough, that something had also seemed to make me hesitate, and to set me analysing my feelings with regard to her. In fact, during the two weeks of my

absence I had felt far more at my ease than I did now, on the day of my return; although, while travelling, I had moped like an imbecile, rushed about like a man in a fever, and actually beheld her in my dreams. Indeed, on one occasion (this happened in Switzerland, when I was asleep in the train) I had spoken aloud to her, and set all my fellow-travellers laughing. Again, therefore, I put to myself the question: "Do I, or do I not love her?" and again I could return myself no answer or, rather, for the hundredth time I told myself that I detested her. Yes, I detested her; there were moments (more especially at the close of our talks together) when I would gladly have given half my life to have strangled her! I swear that, had there, at such moments, been a sharp knife ready to my hand, I would have seized that knife with pleasure, and plunged it into her breast. Yet I also swear that if, on the Shlangenberg, she had really said to me, "Leap into that abyss," I should have leapt into it, and with equal pleasure. Yes, this I knew well. One way or the other, the thing must soon be ended. She, too, knew it in some curious way; the thought that I was fully conscious of her inaccessibility, and of the impossibility of my ever realising my dreams, afforded her, I am certain, the keenest possible pleasure. Otherwise, is it likely that she, the cautious and clever woman that she was, would have indulged in this familiarity and openness with me? Hitherto (I concluded) she had looked upon me in the same light that the old Empress did upon her servant—the Empress who hesitated not to unrobe herself before her slave, since she did not account a slave a man. Yes, often Polina must have taken me for something less than a man!"

Still, she had charged me with a commission—to win what I could at roulette. Yet all the time I could not help wondering why it was so necessary for her to win something, and what new schemes could have sprung to birth in her ever-fertile brain. A host of new and unknown factors seemed to have arisen during the last two weeks. Well, it behoved me to divine them, and to probe them, and that as soon as possible. Yet not now: at the present moment I must repair to the roulette-table.

II

I confess I did not like it. Although I had made up my mind to play, I felt averse to doing so on behalf of some one else. In fact, it almost upset my balance, and I entered the gaming rooms with an angry feeling at my heart. At first glance the scene irritated me. Never at any time have I been able to bear the flunkeyishness which one meets in the Press of the world at large, but more especially in that of Russia, where, almost every evening, journalists write on two subjects in particular—namely, on the splendour and

luxury of the casinos to be found in the Rhenish towns, and on the heaps of gold which are daily to be seen lying on their tables. Those journalists are not paid for doing so: they write thus merely out of a spirit of disinterested complaisance. For there is nothing splendid about the establishments in question; and, not only are there no heaps of gold to be seen lying on their tables, but also there is very little money to be seen at all. Of course, during the season, some madman or another may make his appearance—generally an Englishman, or an Asiatic, or a Turk—and (as had happened during the summer of which I write) win or lose a great deal; but, as regards the rest of the crowd, it plays only for petty gülden, and seldom does much wealth figure on the board.

When, on the present occasion, I entered the gaming-rooms (for the first time in my life), it was several moments before I could even make up my mind to play. For one thing, the crowd oppressed me. Had I been playing for myself, I think I should have left at once, and never have embarked upon gambling at all, for I could feel my heart beginning to beat, and my heart was anything but cold-blooded. Also, I knew, I had long ago made up my mind, that never should I depart from Roulettenberg until some radical, some final, change had taken place in my fortunes. Thus, it must and would be. However ridiculous it may seem to you that I was expecting to win at roulette, I look upon the generally accepted opinion concerning the folly and the grossness of hoping to win at gambling as a thing even more absurd. For why is gambling a whit worse than any other method of acquiring money? How, for instance, is it worse than trade? True, out of a hundred persons, only one can win; yet what business is that of yours or of mine?

At all events, I confined myself at first simply to looking on, and decided to attempt nothing serious. Indeed, I felt that, if I began to do anything at all, I should do it in an absent-minded, haphazard sort of way—of that I felt certain. Also, it behoved me to learn the game itself; since, despite a thousand descriptions of roulette which I had read with ceaseless avidity, I knew nothing of its rules, and had never even seen it played.

In the first place, everything about it seemed to me so foul—so morally mean and foul. Yet I am not speaking of the hungry, restless folk who, by scores nay, even by hundreds—could be seen crowded around the gaming-tables. For in a desire to win

quickly and to win much I can see nothing sordid; I have always applauded the opinion of a certain dead and gone, but cocksure, moralist who replied to the excuse that “one may always gamble moderately”, by saying that to do so makes things worse, since, in that case, the profits too will always be moderate.

Insignificant profits and sumptuous profits do not stand on the same footing. No, it is all a matter of proportion. What may seem a small sum to a Rothschild may seem a large sum to me, and it is not the fault of stakes or of winnings that everywhere men can be found winning, can be found depriving their fellows of something, just as they do at roulette. As to the question whether stakes and winnings are, in themselves, immoral is another question altogether, and I wish to express no opinion upon it. Yet the very fact that I was full of a strong desire to win caused this gambling for gain, in spite of its attendant squalor, to contain, if you will, something intimate, something sympathetic, to my eyes: for it is always pleasant to see men dispensing with ceremony, and acting naturally, and in an unbuttoned mood....

Yet why should I so deceive myself? I could see that the whole thing was a vain and unreasoning pursuit; and what, at the first glance, seemed to me the ugliest feature in this mob of roulette players was their respect for their occupation—the seriousness, and even the humility, with which they stood around the gaming tables. Moreover, I had always drawn sharp distinctions between a game which is de mauvais genre and a game which is permissible to a decent man. In fact, there are two sorts of gaming—namely, the game of the gentleman and the game of the plebs—the game for gain, and the game of the herd. Herein, as said, I draw sharp distinctions. Yet how essentially base are the distinctions! For instance, a gentleman may stake, say, five or ten louis d’or—seldom more, unless he is a very rich man, when he may stake, say, a thousand francs; but, he must do this simply for the love of the game itself—simply for sport, simply in order to observe the process of winning or of losing, and, above all things, as a man who remains quite uninterested in the possibility of his issuing a winner. If he wins, he will be at liberty, perhaps, to give vent to a laugh, or to pass a remark on the circumstance to a bystander, or to stake again, or to double his stake; but, even this he must do solely out of curiosity, and for the pleasure of watching the play of chances and of calculations, and not because of any vulgar desire to win. In a word, he must look upon the gaming-table, upon roulette, and upon trente et quarante, as mere relaxations which have been arranged solely for his amusement. Of the existence of the lures and gains upon which the bank is founded and maintained he

must profess to have not an inkling. Best of all, he ought to imagine his fellow-gamblers and the rest of the mob which stands trembling over a coin to be equally rich and gentlemanly with himself, and playing solely for recreation and pleasure. This complete ignorance of the realities, this innocent view of mankind, is what, in my opinion, constitutes the truly aristocratic. For instance, I have seen even fond mothers so far indulge their guileless, elegant daughters—misses of fifteen or sixteen—as to give them a few gold coins and teach them how to play; and though the young ladies may have won or have lost, they have invariably laughed, and departed as though they were well pleased. In the same way, I saw our General once approach the table in a stolid, important manner. A lacquey darted to offer him a chair, but the General did not even notice him. Slowly he took out his money bags, and slowly extracted 300 francs in gold, which he staked on the black, and won. Yet he did not take up his winnings—he left them there on the table. Again the black turned up, and again he did not gather in what he had won; and when, in the third round, the red turned up he lost, at a stroke, 1200 francs. Yet even then he rose with a smile, and thus preserved his reputation; yet I knew that his money bags must be chafing his heart, as well as that, had the stake been twice or thrice as much again, he would still have restrained himself from venting his disappointment.

On the other hand, I saw a Frenchman first win, and then lose, 30,000 francs cheerfully, and without a murmur. Yes; even if a gentleman should lose his whole substance, he must never give way to annoyance. Money must be so subservient to gentility as never to be worth a thought. Of course, the supremely aristocratic thing is to be entirely oblivious of the mire of rabble, with its setting; but sometimes a reverse course may be aristocratic to remark, to scan, and even to gape at, the mob (for preference, through a lorgnette), even as though one were taking the crowd and its squalor for a sort of raree show which had been organised specially for a gentleman's diversion. Though one may be squeezed by the crowd, one must look as though one were fully assured of being the observer—of having neither part nor lot with the observed. At the same time, to stare fixedly about one is unbecoming; for that, again, is ungentlemanly, seeing that no spectacle is worth an open stare—are no spectacles in the world which merit from a gentleman too pronounced an inspection.

However, to me personally the scene did seem to be worth undisguised contemplation—more especially in view of the fact that I had come there not only to look at, but also to number myself sincerely and wholeheartedly with, the mob. As for

my secret moral views, I had no room for them amongst my actual, practical opinions. Let that stand as written: I am writing only to relieve my conscience. Yet let me say also this: that from the first I have been consistent in having an intense aversion to any trial of my acts and thoughts by a moral standard. Another standard altogether has directed my life....

As a matter of fact, the mob was playing in exceedingly foul fashion. Indeed, I have an idea that sheer robbery was going on around that gaming-table. The croupiers who sat at the two ends of it had not only to watch the stakes, but also to calculate the game—an immense amount of work for two men! As for the crowd itself—well, it consisted mostly of Frenchmen. Yet I was not then taking notes merely in order to be able to give you a description of roulette, but in order to get my bearings as to my behaviour when I myself should begin to play. For example, I noticed that nothing was more common than for another's hand to stretch out and grab one's winnings whenever one had won. Then there would arise a dispute, and frequently an uproar; and it would be a case of "I beg of you to prove, and to produce witnesses to the fact, that the stake is yours."

At first the proceedings were pure Greek to me. I could only divine and distinguish that stakes were hazarded on numbers, on "odd" or "even," and on colours. Polina's money I decided to risk, that evening, only to the amount of 100 gülden. The thought that I was not going to play for myself quite unnerved me. It was an unpleasant sensation, and I tried hard to banish it. I had a feeling that, once I had begun to play for Polina, I should wreck my own fortunes. Also, I wonder if any one has ever approached a gaming-table without falling an immediate prey to superstition? I began by pulling out fifty gülden, and staking them on "even." The wheel spun and stopped at 13. I had lost! With a feeling like a sick qualm, as though I would like to make my way out of the crowd and go home, I staked another fifty gülden—this time on the red. The red turned up. Next time I staked the 100 gülden just where they lay—and again the red turned up. Again I staked the whole sum, and again the red turned up. Clutching my 400 gülden, I placed 200 of them on twelve figures, to see what would come of it. The result was that the croupier paid me out three times my total stake! Thus from 100 gülden my store had grown to 800! Upon that such a curious, such an inexplicable, unwonted feeling overcame me that I decided to depart. Always the thought kept recurring to me that if I had been playing for myself alone I should never have had such luck. Once more I staked the whole 800 gülden on the "even." The wheel stopped

at 4. I was paid out another 800 gülden, and, snatching up my pile of 1600, departed in search of Polina Alexandrovna.

I found the whole party walking in the park, and was able to get an interview with her only after supper. This time the Frenchman was absent from the meal, and the General seemed to be in a more expansive vein. Among other things, he thought it necessary to remind me that he would be sorry to see me playing at the gaming-tables. In his opinion, such conduct would greatly compromise him—especially if I were to lose much. "And even if you were to win much I should be compromised," he added in a meaning sort of way. "Of course I have no right to order your actions, but you yourself will agree that..." As usual, he did not finish his sentence. I answered drily that I had very little money in my possession, and that, consequently, I was hardly in a position to indulge in any conspicuous play, even if I did gamble. At last, when ascending to my own room, I succeeded in handing Polina her winnings, and told her that, next time, I should not play for her.

"Why not?" she asked excitedly.

"Because I wish to play for myself," I replied with a feigned glance of astonishment. "That is my sole reason."

"Then are you so certain that your roulette-playing will get us out of our difficulties?" she inquired with a quizzical smile.

I said very seriously, "Yes," and then added: "Possibly my certainty about winning may seem to you ridiculous; yet, pray leave me in peace."

Nonetheless she insisted that I ought to go halves with her in the day's winnings, and offered me 800 gülden on condition that henceforth, I gambled only on those terms; but I refused to do so, once and for all—stating, as my reason, that I found myself unable to play on behalf of any one else, "I am not unwilling so to do," I added, "but in all probability I should lose."

“Well, absurd though it be, I place great hopes on your playing of roulette,” she remarked musingly; “wherefore, you ought to play as my partner and on equal shares; wherefore, of course, you will do as I wish.”

Then she left me without listening to any further protests on my part.

III

On the morrow she said not a word to me about gambling. In fact, she purposely avoided me, although her old manner to me had not changed: the same serene coolness was hers on meeting me—a coolness that was mingled even with a spice of contempt and dislike. In short, she was at no pains to conceal her aversion to me. That I could see plainly. Also, she did not trouble to conceal from me the fact that I was necessary to her, and that she was keeping me for some end which she had in view. Consequently there became established between us relations which, to a large extent, were incomprehensible to me, considering her general pride and aloofness. For example, although she knew that I was madly in love with her, she allowed me to speak to her of my passion (though she could not well have showed her contempt for me more than by permitting me, unhindered and unrebuked, to mention to her my love).

“You see,” her attitude expressed, “how little I regard your feelings, as well as how little I care for what you say to me, or for what you feel for me.” Likewise, though she spoke as before concerning her affairs, it was never with complete frankness. In her contempt for me there were refinements. Although she knew well that I was aware of a certain circumstance in her life of something which might one day cause her trouble, she would speak to me about her affairs (whenever she had need of me for a given end) as though I were a slave or a passing acquaintance—yet tell them me only in so far as one would need to know them if one were going to be made temporary use of. Had I not known the whole chain of events, or had she not seen how much I was pained and disturbed by her teasing insistency, she would never have thought it worthwhile to soothe me with this frankness—even though, since she not infrequently used me to execute commissions that were not only troublesome, but risky, she ought, in my opinion, to have been frank in any case. But, forsooth, it was not worth

her while to trouble about my feelings—about the fact that I was uneasy, and, perhaps, thrice as put about by her cares and misfortunes as she was herself!

For three weeks I had known of her intention to take to roulette. She had even warned me that she would like me to play on her behalf, since it was unbecoming for her to play in person; and, from the tone of her words I had gathered that there was something on her mind besides a mere desire to win money. As if money could matter to her! No, she had some end in view, and there were circumstances at which I could guess, but which I did not know for certain. True, the slavery and abasement in which she held me might have given me (such things often do so) the power to question her with abrupt directness (seeing that, inasmuch as I figured in her eyes as a mere slave and nonentity, she could not very well have taken offence at any rude curiosity); but the fact was that, though she let me question her, she never returned me a single answer, and at times did not so much as notice me. That is how matters stood.

Next day there was a good deal of talk about a telegram which, four days ago, had been sent to St. Petersburg, but to which there had come no answer. The General was visibly disturbed and moody, for the matter concerned his mother. The Frenchman, too, was excited, and after dinner the whole party talked long and seriously together—the Frenchman's tone being extraordinarily presumptuous and offhand to everybody. It almost reminded one of the proverb, "Invite a man to your table, and soon he will place his feet upon it." Even to Polina he was brusque almost to the point of rudeness. Yet still he seemed glad to join us in our walks in the Casino, or in our rides and drives about the town. I had long been aware of certain circumstances which bound the General to him; I had long been aware that in Russia they had hatched some scheme together although I did not know whether the plot had come to anything, or whether it was still only in the stage of being talked of. Likewise I was aware, in part, of a family secret—namely, that, last year, the Frenchman had bailed the General out of debt, and given him 30,000 roubles wherewith to pay his Treasury dues on retiring from the service. And now, of course, the General was in a vice—although the chief part in the affair was being played by Mlle. Blanche. Yes, of this last I had no doubt.

But who was this Mlle. Blanche? It was said of her that she was a Frenchwoman of good birth who, living with her mother, possessed a colossal fortune. It was also said that she was some relation to the Marquis, but only a distant one a cousin, or cousin-

german, or something of the sort. Likewise I knew that, up to the time of my journey to Paris, she and the Frenchman had been more ceremonious towards our party—they had stood on a much more precise and delicate footing with them; but that now their acquaintanceship—their friendship, their intimacy—had taken on a much more off-hand and rough-and-ready air. Perhaps they thought that our means were too modest for them, and, therefore, unworthy of politeness or reticence. Also, for the last three days I had noticed certain looks which Astley had kept throwing at Mlle. Blanche and her mother; and it had occurred to me that he must have had some previous acquaintance with the pair. I had even surmised that the Frenchman too must have met Mr. Astley before. Astley was a man so shy, reserved, and taciturn in his manner that one might have looked for anything from him. At all events the Frenchman accorded him only the slightest of greetings, and scarcely even looked at him. Certainly he did not seem to be afraid of him; which was intelligible enough. But why did Mlle. Blanche also never look at the Englishman?—particularly since, à propos of something or another, the Marquis had declared the Englishman to be immensely and indubitably rich? Was not that a sufficient reason to make Mlle. Blanche look at the Englishman? Anyway the General seemed extremely uneasy; and, one could well understand what a telegram to announce the death of his mother would mean for him!

Although I thought it probable that Polina was avoiding me for a definite reason, I adopted a cold and indifferent air; for I felt pretty certain that it would not be long before she herself approached me. For two days, therefore, I devoted my attention to Mlle. Blanche. The poor General was in despair! To fall in love at fifty-five, and with such vehemence, is indeed a misfortune! And add to that his widowerhood, his children, his ruined property, his debts, and the woman with whom he had fallen in love! Though Mlle. Blanche was extremely good-looking, I may or may not be understood when I say that she had one of those faces which one is afraid of. At all events, I myself have always feared such women. Apparently about twenty-five years of age, she was tall and broad-shouldered, with shoulders that sloped; yet though her neck and bosom were ample in their proportions, her skin was dull yellow in colour, while her hair (which was extremely abundant—sufficient to make two coiffures) was as black as Indian ink. Add to that a pair of black eyes with yellowish whites, a proud glance, gleaming teeth, and lips which were perennially pomaded and redolent of musk. As for her dress, it was invariably rich, effective, and chic, yet in good taste. Lastly, her feet and hands were astonishing, and her voice a deep contralto. Sometimes, when she laughed, she displayed her teeth, but at ordinary times her air

was taciturn and haughty—especially in the presence of Polina and Maria Philipovna. Yet she seemed to me almost destitute of education, and even of wits, though cunning and suspicious. This, apparently, was not because her life had been lacking in incident. Perhaps, if all were known, the Marquis was not her kinsman at all, nor her mother, her mother; but there was evidence that, in Berlin, where we had first come across the pair, they had possessed acquaintances of good standing. As for the Marquis himself, I doubt to this day if he was a Marquis—although about the fact that he had formerly belonged to high society (for instance, in Moscow and Germany) there could be no doubt whatever. What he had formerly been in France I had not a notion. All I knew was that he was said to possess a château. During the last two weeks I had looked for much to transpire, but am still ignorant whether at that time anything decisive ever passed between Mademoiselle and the General. Everything seemed to depend upon our means—upon whether the General would be able to flourish sufficient money in her face. If ever the news should arrive that the grandmother was not dead, Mlle. Blanche, I felt sure, would disappear in a twinkling. Indeed, it surprised and amused me to observe what a passion for intrigue I was developing. But how I loathed it all! With what pleasure would I have given everybody and everything the go-by! Only—I could not leave Polina. How, then, could I show contempt for those who surrounded her? Espionage is a base thing, but—what have I to do with that?

Mr. Astley, too, I found a curious person. I was only sure that he had fallen in love with Polina. A remarkable and diverting circumstance is the amount which may lie in the mien of a shy and painfully modest man who has been touched with the divine passion—especially when he would rather sink into the earth than betray himself by a single word or look. Though Mr. Astley frequently met us when we were out walking, he would merely take off his hat and pass us by, though I knew he was dying to join us. Even when invited to do so, he would refuse. Again, in places of amusement—in the Casino, at concerts, or near the fountain—he was never far from the spot where we were sitting. In fact, wherever we were in the Park, in the forest, or on the Shlangenberg—one needed but to raise one's eyes and glance around to catch sight of at least a portion of Mr. Astley's frame sticking out—whether on an adjacent path or behind a bush. Yet never did he lose any chance of speaking to myself; and, one morning when we had met, and exchanged a couple of words, he burst out in his usual abrupt way, without saying "Good-morning."

"That Mlle. Blanche," he said. "Well, I have seen a good many women like her."

After that he was silent as he looked me meaningly in the face. What he meant I did not know, but to my glance of inquiry he returned only a dry nod, and a reiterated “It is so.” Presently, however, he resumed:

“Does Mlle. Polina like flowers?”

“I really cannot say,” was my reply.

“What? You cannot say?” he cried in great astonishment.

“No; I have never noticed whether she does so or not,” I repeated with a smile.

“Hm! Then I have an idea in my mind,” he concluded. Lastly, with a nod, he walked away with a pleased expression on his face. The conversation had been carried on in execrable French.

IV

Today has been a day of folly, stupidity, and ineptness. The time is now eleven o’clock in the evening, and I am sitting in my room and thinking. It all began, this morning, with my being forced to go and play roulette for Polina Alexandrovna. When she handed me over her store of six hundred gülden I exacted two conditions—namely, that I should not go halves with her in her winnings, if any (that is to say, I should not take anything for myself), and that she should explain to me, that same evening, why it was so necessary for her to win, and how much was the sum which she needed. For, I could not suppose that she was doing all this merely for the sake of money. Yet clearly she did need some money, and that as soon as possible, and for a special purpose. Well, she promised to explain matters, and I departed. There was a tremendous crowd in the gaming-rooms. What an arrogant, greedy crowd it was! I pressed forward towards the middle of the room until I had secured a seat at a croupier’s elbow. Then I began to play in timid fashion, venturing only twenty or thirty gülden at a time. Meanwhile, I

observed and took notes. It seemed to me that calculation was superfluous, and by no means possessed of the importance which certain other players attached to it, even though they sat with ruled papers in their hands, whereon they set down the coups, calculated the chances, reckoned, staked, and—lost exactly as we more simple mortals did who played without any reckoning at all.

However, I deduced from the scene one conclusion which seemed to me reliable—namely, that in the flow of fortuitous chances there is, if not a system, at all events a sort of order. This, of course, is a very strange thing. For instance, after a dozen middle figures there would always occur a dozen or so outer ones. Suppose the ball stopped twice at a dozen outer figures; it would then pass to a dozen of the first ones, and then, again, to a dozen of the middle ciphers, and fall upon them three or four times, and then revert to a dozen outers; whence, after another couple of rounds, the ball would again pass to the first figures, strike upon them once, and then return thrice to the middle series—continuing thus for an hour and a half, or two hours. One, three, two: one, three, two. It was all very curious. Again, for the whole of a day or a morning the red would alternate with the black, but almost without any order, and from moment to moment, so that scarcely two consecutive rounds would end upon either the one or the other. Yet, next day, or, perhaps, the next evening, the red alone would turn up, and attain a run of over two score, and continue so for quite a length of time—say, for a whole day. Of these circumstances the majority were pointed out to me by Mr. Astley, who stood by the gaming-table the whole morning, yet never once staked in person.

For myself, I lost all that I had on me, and with great speed. To begin with, I staked two hundred gülden on “even,” and won. Then I staked the same amount again, and won: and so on some two or three times. At one moment I must have had in my hands—gathered there within a space of five minutes—about 4000 gülden. That, of course, was the proper moment for me to have departed, but there arose in me a strange sensation as of a challenge to Fate—as of a wish to deal her a blow on the cheek, and to put out my tongue at her. Accordingly I set down the largest stake allowed by the rules—namely, 4000 gülden—and lost. Fired by this mishap, I pulled out all the money left to me, staked it all on the same venture, and—again lost! Then I rose from the table, feeling as though I were stupefied. What had happened to me I did not know; but, before luncheon I told Polina of my losses—until which time I walked about the Park.

At luncheon I was as excited as I had been at the meal three days ago. Mlle. Blanche and the Frenchman were lunching with us, and it appeared that the former had been to the Casino that morning, and had seen my exploits there. So now she showed me more attention when talking to me; while, for his part, the Frenchman approached me, and asked outright if it had been my own money that I had lost. He appeared to be suspicious as to something being on foot between Polina and myself, but I merely fired up, and replied that the money had been all my own.

At this the General seemed extremely surprised, and asked me whence I had procured it; whereupon I replied that, though I had begun only with 100 gülden, six or seven rounds had increased my capital to 5000 or 6000 gülden, and that subsequently I had lost the whole in two rounds.

All this, of course, was plausible enough. During my recital I glanced at Polina, but nothing was to be discerned on her face. However, she had allowed me to fire up without correcting me, and from that I concluded that it was my cue to fire up, and to conceal the fact that I had been playing on her behalf. “At all events,” I thought to myself, “she, in her turn, has promised to give me an explanation to-night, and to reveal to me something or another.”

Although the General appeared to be taking stock of me, he said nothing. Yet I could see uneasiness and annoyance in his face. Perhaps his straitened circumstances made it hard for him to have to hear of piles of gold passing through the hands of an irresponsible fool like myself within the space of a quarter of an hour. Now, I have an idea that, last night, he and the Frenchman had a sharp encounter with one another. At all events they closeted themselves together, and then had a long and vehement discussion; after which the Frenchman departed in what appeared to be a passion, but returned, early this morning, to renew the combat. On hearing of my losses, however, he only remarked with a sharp, and even a malicious, air that “a man ought to go more carefully.” Next, for some reason or another, he added that, “though a great many Russians go in for gambling, they are no good at the game.”

“I think that roulette was devised specially for Russians,” I retorted; and when the Frenchman smiled contemptuously at my reply I further remarked that I was sure I

was right; also that, speaking of Russians in the capacity of gamblers, I had far more blame for them than praise—of that he could be quite sure.

“Upon what do you base your opinion?” he inquired.

“Upon the fact that to the virtues and merits of the civilised Westerner there has become historically added—though this is not his chief point—a capacity for acquiring capital; whereas, not only is the Russian incapable of acquiring capital, but also he exhausts it wantonly and of sheer folly. None the less we Russians often need money; wherefore, we are glad of, and greatly devoted to, a method of acquisition like roulette—whereby, in a couple of hours, one may grow rich without doing any work. This method, I repeat, has a great attraction for us, but since we play in wanton fashion, and without taking any trouble, we almost invariably lose.”

“To a certain extent that is true,” assented the Frenchman with a self-satisfied air.

“Oh no, it is not true,” put in the General sternly. “And you,” he added to me, “you ought to be ashamed of yourself for traducing your own country!”

“I beg pardon,” I said. “Yet it would be difficult to say which is the worst of the two—Russian ineptitude or the German method of growing rich through honest toil.”

“What an extraordinary idea,” cried the General.

“And what a Russian idea!” added the Frenchman.

I smiled, for I was rather glad to have a quarrel with them.

“I would rather live a wandering life in tents,” I cried, “than bow the knee to a German idol!”

“To what idol?” exclaimed the General, now seriously angry.

“To the German method of heaping up riches. I have not been here very long, but I can tell you that what I have seen and verified makes my Tartar blood boil. Good Lord! I wish for no virtues of that kind. Yesterday I went for a walk of about ten versts; and, everywhere I found that things were even as we read of them in good German picture-books—that every house has its ‘Vater,’ who is horribly beneficent and extraordinarily honourable. So honourable is he that it is dreadful to have anything to do with him; and I cannot bear people of that sort. Each such ‘Vater’ has his family, and in the evenings they read improving books aloud. Over their roof-trees there murmur elms and chestnuts; the sun has sunk to his rest; a stork is roosting on the gable; and all is beautifully poetic and touching. Do not be angry, General. Let me tell you something that is even more touching than that. I can remember how, of an evening, my own father, now dead, used to sit under the lime trees in his little garden, and to read books aloud to myself and my mother. Yes, I know how things ought to be done. Yet every German family is bound to slavery and to submission to its ‘Vater.’ They work like oxen, and amass wealth like Jews. Suppose the ‘Vater’ has put by a certain number of gülden which he hands over to his eldest son, in order that the said son may acquire a trade or a small plot of land. Well, one result is to deprive the daughter of a dowry, and so leave her among the unwedded. For the same reason, the parents will have to sell the younger son into bondage or the ranks of the army, in order that he may earn more towards the family capital. Yes, such things ARE done, for I have been making inquiries on the subject. It is all done out of sheer rectitude—out of a rectitude which is magnified to the point of the younger son believing that he has been rightly sold, and that it is simply idyllic for the victim to rejoice when he is made over into pledge. What more have I to tell? Well, this—that matters bear just as hardly upon the eldest son. Perhaps he has his Gretchen to whom his heart is bound; but he cannot marry her, for the reason that he has not yet amassed sufficient gülden. So, the pair wait on in a mood of sincere and virtuous expectation, and smilingly deposit themselves in pawn the while. Gretchen’s cheeks grow sunken, and she begins to wither; until at last, after some twenty years, their substance has multiplied, and sufficient gülden have been honourably and virtuously accumulated. Then the ‘Vater’ blesses his forty-year-old heir and the thirty-five-year-old Gretchen with the sunken bosom and the scarlet

nose; after which he bursts, into tears, reads the pair a lesson on morality, and dies. In turn the eldest son becomes a virtuous ‘Vater,’ and the old story begins again. In fifty or sixty years’ time the grandson of the original ‘Vater’ will have amassed a considerable sum; and that sum he will hand over to, his son, and the latter to his son, and so on for several generations; until at length there will issue a Baron Rothschild, or a ‘Hoppe and Company,’ or the devil knows what! Is it not a beautiful spectacle—the spectacle of a century or two of inherited labour, patience, intellect, rectitude, character, perseverance, and calculation, with a stork sitting on the roof above it all? What is more; they think there can never be anything better than this; wherefore, from their point of view they begin to judge the rest of the world, and to censure all who are at fault—that is to say, who are not exactly like themselves. Yes, there you have it in a nutshell. For my own part, I would rather grow fat after the Russian manner, or squander my whole substance at roulette. I have no wish to be ‘Hoppe and Company’ at the end of five generations. I want the money for myself, for in no way do I look upon my personality as necessary to, or meet to be given over to, capital. I may be wrong, but there you have it. Those are my views.”

“How far you may be right in what you have said I do not know,” remarked the General moodily; “but I do know that you are becoming an insufferable farçeur whenever you are given the least chance.”

As usual, he left his sentence unfinished. Indeed, whenever he embarked upon anything that in the least exceeded the limits of daily small-talk, he left unfinished what he was saying. The Frenchman had listened to me contemptuously, with a slight protruding of his eyes; but, he could not have understood very much of my harangue. As for Polina, she had looked on with serene indifference. She seemed to have heard neither my voice nor any other during the progress of the meal.

V

Yes, she had been extraordinarily meditative. Yet, on leaving the table, she immediately ordered me to accompany her for a walk. We took the children with us, and set out for the fountain in the Park.

I was in such an irritated frame of mind that in rude and abrupt fashion I blurted out a question as to “why our Marquis de Griers had ceased to accompany her for strolls, or to speak to her for days together.”

“Because he is a brute,” she replied in rather a curious way. It was the first time that I had heard her speak so of De Griers: consequently, I was momentarily awed into silence by this expression of resentment.

“Have you noticed, too, that today he is by no means on good terms with the General?” I went on.

“Yes—and I suppose you want to know why,” she replied with dry captiousness. “You are aware, are you not, that the General is mortgaged to the Marquis, with all his property? Consequently, if the General’s mother does not die, the Frenchman will become the absolute possessor of everything which he now holds only in pledge.”

“Then it is really the case that everything is mortgaged? I have heard rumours to that effect, but was unaware how far they might be true.”

“Yes, they are true. What then?”

“Why, it will be a case of ‘Farewell, Mlle. Blanche,’” I remarked; “for in such an event she would never become Madame General. Do you know, I believe the old man is so much in love with her that he will shoot himself if she should throw him over. At his age it is a dangerous thing to fall in love.”

“Yes, something, I believe, will happen to him,” assented Polina thoughtfully.

“And what a fine thing it all is!” I continued. “Could anything be more abominable than the way in which she has agreed to marry for money alone? Not one of the decencies

has been observed; the whole affair has taken place without the least ceremony. And as for the grandmother, what could be more comical, yet more dastardly, than the sending of telegram after telegram to know if she is dead? What do you think of it, Polina Alexandrovna?"

"Yes, it is very horrible," she interrupted with a shudder. "Consequently, I am the more surprised that you should be so cheerful. What are you so pleased about? About the fact that you have gone and lost my money?"

"What? The money that you gave me to lose? I told you I should never win for other people—least of all for you. I obeyed you simply because you ordered me to; but you must not blame me for the result. I warned you that no good would ever come of it. You seem much depressed at having lost your money. Why do you need it so greatly?"

"Why do you ask me these questions?"

"Because you promised to explain matters to me. Listen. I am certain that, as soon as ever I 'begin to play for myself' (and I still have 120 gülden left), I shall win. You can then take of me what you require."

She made a contemptuous grimace.

"You must not be angry with me," I continued, "for making such a proposal. I am so conscious of being only a nonentity in your eyes that you need not mind accepting money from me. A gift from me could not possibly offend you. Moreover, it was I who lost your gülden."

She glanced at me, but, seeing that I was in an irritable, sarcastic mood, changed the subject.

“My affairs cannot possibly interest you,” she said. “Still, if you do wish to know, I am in debt. I borrowed some money, and must pay it back again. I have a curious, senseless idea that I am bound to win at the gaming-tables. Why I think so I cannot tell, but I do think so, and with some assurance. Perhaps it is because of that assurance that I now find myself without any other resource.”

“Or perhaps it is because it is so necessary for you to win. It is like a drowning man catching at a straw. You yourself will agree that, unless he were drowning he would not mistake a straw for the trunk of a tree.”

Polina looked surprised.

“What?” she said. “Do not you also hope something from it? Did you not tell me again and again, two weeks ago, that you were certain of winning at roulette if you played here? And did you not ask me not to consider you a fool for doing so? Were you joking? You cannot have been, for I remember that you spoke with a gravity which forbade the idea of your jesting.”

“True,” I replied gloomily. “I always felt certain that I should win. Indeed, what you say makes me ask myself—Why have my absurd, senseless losses of today raised a doubt in my mind? Yet I am still positive that, so soon as ever I begin to play for myself, I shall infallibly win.”

“And why are you so certain?”

“To tell the truth, I do not know. I only know that I must win—that it is the one resource I have left. Yes, why do I feel so assured on the point?”

“Perhaps because one cannot help winning if one is fanatically certain of doing so.”

“Yet I dare wager that you do not think me capable of serious feeling in the matter?”

“I do not care whether you are so or not,” answered Polina with calm indifference. “Well, since you ask me, I do doubt your ability to take anything seriously. You are capable of worrying, but not deeply. You are too ill-regulated and unsettled a person for that. But why do you want money? Not a single one of the reasons which you have given can be looked upon as serious.”

“By the way,” I interrupted, “you say you want to pay off a debt. It must be a large one. Is it to the Frenchman?”

“What do you mean by asking all these questions? You are very clever today. Surely you are not drunk?”

“You know that you and I stand on no ceremony, and that sometimes I put to you very plain questions. I repeat that I am your slave—and slaves cannot be shamed or offended.”

“You talk like a child. It is always possible to comport oneself with dignity. If one has a quarrel it ought to elevate rather than to degrade one.”

“A maxim straight from the copybook! Suppose I cannot comport myself with dignity. By that I mean that, though I am a man of self-respect, I am unable to carry off a situation properly. Do you know the reason? It is because we Russians are too richly and multifariously gifted to be able at once to find the proper mode of expression. It is all a question of mode. Most of us are so bounteously endowed with intellect as to require also a spice of genius to choose the right form of behaviour. And genius is lacking in us for the reason that so little genius at all exists. It belongs only to the French—though a few other Europeans have elaborated their forms so well as to be able to figure with extreme dignity, and yet be wholly undignified persons. That is why, with us, the mode is so all-important. The Frenchman may receive an insult—a real, a venomous insult: yet, he will not so much as frown. But a tweaking of the nose he

cannot bear, for the reason that such an act is an infringement of the accepted, of the time-hallowed order of decorum. That is why our good ladies are so fond of Frenchmen—the Frenchman's manners, they say, are perfect! But in my opinion there is no such thing as a Frenchman's manners. The Frenchman is only a bird—the coq gaulois. At the same time, as I am not a woman, I do not properly understand the question. Cocks may be excellent birds. If I am wrong you must stop me. You ought to stop and correct me more often when I am speaking to you, for I am too apt to say everything that is in my head.

"You see, I have lost my manners. I agree that I have none, nor yet any dignity. I will tell you why. I set no store upon such things. Everything in me has undergone a cheek. You know the reason. I have not a single human thought in my head. For a long while I have been ignorant of what is going on in the world—here or in Russia. I have been to Dresden, yet am completely in the dark as to what Dresden is like. You know the cause of my obsession. I have no hope now, and am a mere cipher in your eyes; wherefore, I tell you outright that wherever I go I see only you—all the rest is a matter of indifference.

"Why or how I have come to love you I do not know. It may be that you are not altogether fair to look upon. Do you know, I am ignorant even as to what your face is like. In all probability, too, your heart is not comely, and it is possible that your mind is wholly ignoble."

"And because you do not believe in my nobility of soul you think to purchase me with money?" she said.

"When have I thought to do so?" was my reply.

"You are losing the thread of the argument. If you do not wish to purchase me, at all events you wish to purchase my respect."

“Not at all. I have told you that I find it difficult to explain myself. You are hard upon me. Do not be angry at my chattering. You know why you ought not to be angry with me—that I am simply an imbecile. However, I do not mind if you are angry. Sitting in my room, I need but to think of you, to imagine to myself the rustle of your dress, and at once I fall almost to biting my hands. Why should you be angry with me? Because I call myself your slave? Revel, I pray you, in my slavery—revel in it. Do you know that sometimes I could kill you?—not because I do not love you, or am jealous of you, but, because I feel as though I could simply devour you… You are laughing!”

“No, I am not,” she retorted. “But I order you, nevertheless, to be silent.”

She stopped, well nigh breathless with anger. God knows, she may not have been a beautiful woman, yet I loved to see her come to a halt like this, and was therefore, the more fond of arousing her temper. Perhaps she divined this, and for that very reason gave way to rage. I said as much to her.

“What rubbish!” she cried with a shudder.

“I do not care,” I continued. “Also, do you know that it is not safe for us to take walks together? Often I have a feeling that I should like to strike you, to disfigure you, to strangle you. Are you certain that it will never come to that? You are driving me to frenzy. Am I afraid of a scandal, or of your anger? Why should I fear your anger? I love without hope, and know that hereafter I shall love you a thousand times more. If ever I should kill you I should have to kill myself too. But I shall put off doing so as long as possible, for I wish to continue enjoying the unbearable pain which your coldness gives me. Do you know a very strange thing? It is that, with every day, my love for you increases—though that would seem to be almost an impossibility. Why should I not become a fatalist? Remember how, on the third day that we ascended the Shlangenberg, I was moved to whisper in your ear: ‘Say but the word, and I will leap into the abyss.’ Had you said it, I should have leapt. Do you not believe me?”

“What stupid rubbish!” she cried.

“I care not whether it be wise or stupid,” I cried in return. “I only know that in your presence I must speak, speak, speak. Therefore, I am speaking. I lose all conceit when I am with you, and everything ceases to matter.”

“Why should I have wanted you to leap from the Shlangenberg?” she said drily, and (I think) with wilful offensiveness. “That would have been of no use to me.”

“Splendid!” I shouted. “I know well that you must have used the words ‘of no use’ in order to crush me. I can see through you. ‘Of no use,’ did you say? Why, to give pleasure is always of use; and, as for barbarous, unlimited power—even if it be only over a fly—why, it is a kind of luxury. Man is a despot by nature, and loves to torture. You, in particular, love to do so.”

I remember that at this moment she looked at me in a peculiar way. The fact is that my face must have been expressing all the maze of senseless, gross sensations which were seething within me. To this day I can remember, word for word, the conversation as I have written it down. My eyes were suffused with blood, and the foam had caked itself on my lips. Also, on my honour I swear that, had she bidden me cast myself from the summit of the Shlangenberg, I should have done it. Yes, had she bidden me in jest, or only in contempt and with a spit in my face, I should have cast myself down.

“Oh no! Why so? I believe you,” she said, but in such a manner—in the manner of which, at times, she was a mistress—and with such a note of disdain and viperish arrogance in her tone, that God knows I could have killed her.

Yes, at that moment she stood in peril. I had not lied to her about that.

“Surely you are not a coward?” suddenly she asked me.

“I do not know,” I replied. “Perhaps I am, but I do not know. I have long given up thinking about such things.”

“If I said to you, ‘Kill that man,’ would you kill him?”

“Whom?”

“Whomsoever I wish?”

“The Frenchman?”

“Do not ask me questions; return me answers. I repeat, whomsoever I wish? I desire to see if you were speaking seriously just now.”

She awaited my reply with such gravity and impatience that I found the situation unpleasant.

“Do you, rather, tell me,” I said, “what is going on here? Why do you seem half-afraid of me? I can see for myself what is wrong. You are the step-daughter of a ruined and insensate man who is smitten with love for this devil of a Blanche. And there is this Frenchman, too, with his mysterious influence over you. Yet, you actually ask me such a question! If you do not tell me how things stand, I shall have to put in my oar and do something. Are you ashamed to be frank with me? Are you shy of me?”

“I am not going to talk to you on that subject. I have asked you a question, and am waiting for an answer.”

“Well, then—I will kill whomsoever you wish,” I said. “But are you really going to bid me do such deeds?”

“Why should you think that I am going to let you off? I shall bid you do it, or else renounce me. Could you ever do the latter? No, you know that you couldn’t. You would first kill whom I had bidden you, and then kill me for having dared to send you away!”

Something seemed to strike upon my brain as I heard these words. Of course, at the time I took them half in jest and half as a challenge; yet, she had spoken them with great seriousness. I felt thunderstruck that she should so express herself, that she should assert such a right over me, that she should assume such authority and say outright: “Either you kill whom I bid you, or I will have nothing more to do with you.” Indeed, in what she had said there was something so cynical and unveiled as to pass all bounds. For how could she ever regard me as the same after the killing was done? This was more than slavery and abasement; it was sufficient to bring a man back to his right senses. Yet, despite the outrageous improbability of our conversation, my heart shook within me.

Suddenly, she burst out laughing. We were seated on a bench near the spot where the children were playing—just opposite the point in the alley-way before the Casino where the carriages drew up in order to set down their occupants.

“Do you see that fat Baroness?” she cried. “It is the Baroness Burmergelm. She arrived three days ago. Just look at her husband—that tall, wizened Prussian there, with the stick in his hand. Do you remember how he stared at us the other day? Well, go to the Baroness, take off your hat to her, and say something in French.”

“Why?”

“Because you have sworn that you would leap from the Shlangenberg for my sake, and that you would kill any one whom I might bid you kill. Well, instead of such murders and tragedies, I wish only for a good laugh. Go without answering me, and let me see the Baron give you a sound thrashing with his stick.”

“Then you throw me out a challenge?—you think that I will not do it?”

“Yes, I do challenge you. Go, for such is my will.”

“Then I will go, however mad be your fancy. Only, look here: shall you not be doing the General a great disservice, as well as, through him, a great disservice to yourself? It is not about myself I am worrying—it is about you and the General. Why, for a mere fancy, should I go and insult a woman?”

“Ah! Then I can see that you are only a trifler,” she said contemptuously. “Your eyes are swimming with blood—but only because you have drunk a little too much at luncheon. Do I not know that what I have asked you to do is foolish and wrong, and that the General will be angry about it? But I want to have a good laugh, all the same. I want that, and nothing else. Why should you insult a woman, indeed? Well, you will be given a sound thrashing for so doing.”

I turned away, and went silently to do her bidding. Of course the thing was folly, but I could not get out of it. I remember that, as I approached the Baroness, I felt as excited as a schoolboy. I was in a frenzy, as though I were drunk.

VI

Two days have passed since that day of lunacy. What a noise and a fuss and a chattering and an uproar there was! And what a welter of unseemliness and disorder and stupidity and bad manners! And I the cause of it all! Yet part of the scene was also ridiculous—at all events to myself it was so. I am not quite sure what was the matter with me—whether I was merely stupefied or whether I purposely broke loose and ran amok. At times my mind seems all confused; while at other times I seem almost to be back in my childhood, at the school desk, and to have done the deed simply out of mischief.

It all came of Polina—yes, of Polina. But for her, there might never have been a fracas. Or perhaps I did the deed in a fit of despair (though it may be foolish of me to think so)? What there is so attractive about her I cannot think. Yet there is something

attractive about her—something passing fair, it would seem. Others besides myself she has driven to distraction. She is tall and straight, and very slim. Her body looks as though it could be tied into a knot, or bent double, like a cord. The imprint of her foot is long and narrow. It is, a maddening imprint—yes, simply a maddening one! And her hair has a reddish tint about it, and her eyes are like cat's eyes—though able also to glance with proud, disdainful mien. On the evening of my first arrival, four months ago, I remember that she was sitting and holding an animated conversation with De Griers in the salon. And the way in which she looked at him was such that later, when I retired to my own room upstairs, I kept fancying that she had smitten him in the face—that she had smitten him right on the cheek, so peculiar had been her look as she stood confronting him. Ever since that evening I have loved her.

But to my tale.

I stepped from the path into the carriage-way, and took my stand in the middle of it. There I awaited the Baron and the Baroness. When they were but a few paces distant from me I took off my hat, and bowed.

I remember that the Baroness was clad in a voluminous silk dress, pale grey in colour, and adorned with flounces and a crinoline and train. Also, she was short and inordinately stout, while her gross, flabby chin completely concealed her neck. Her face was purple, and the little eyes in it had an impudent, malicious expression. Yet she walked as though she were conferring a favour upon everybody by so doing. As for the Baron, he was tall, wizened, bony-faced after the German fashion, spectacled, and, apparently, about forty-five years of age. Also, he had legs which seemed to begin almost at his chest—or, rather, at his chin! Yet, for all his air of peacock-like conceit, his clothes sagged a little, and his face wore a sheepish air which might have passed for profundity.

These details I noted within a space of a few seconds.

At first my bow and the fact that I had my hat in my hand barely caught their attention. The Baron only scowled a little, and the Baroness swept straight on.

“Madame la Baronne,” said I, loudly and distinctly—embroidering each word, as it were—“j’ai l’honneur d’être votre esclave.”

Then I bowed again, put on my hat, and walked past the Baron with a rude smile on my face.

Polina had ordered me merely to take off my hat: the bow and the general effrontery were of my own invention. God knows what instigated me to perpetrate the outrage! In my frenzy I felt as though I were walking on air.

“Hein!” ejaculated—or, rather, growled—the Baron as he turned towards me in angry surprise.

I too turned round, and stood waiting in pseudo-courteous expectation. Yet still I wore on my face an impudent smile as I gazed at him. He seemed to hesitate, and his brows contracted to their utmost limits. Every moment his visage was growing darker. The Baroness also turned in my direction, and gazed at me in wrathful perplexity, while some of the passers-by also began to stare at us, and others of them halted outright.

“Hein!” the Baron vociferated again, with a redoubled growl and a note of growing wrath in his voice.

“Ja wohl!” I replied, still looking him in the eyes.

“Sind Sie rasend?” he exclaimed, brandishing his stick, and, apparently, beginning to feel nervous. Perhaps it was my costume which intimidated him, for I was well and fashionably dressed, after the manner of a man who belongs to indisputably good society.

“Ja wo-o-ohl!” cried I again with all my might with a longdrawn rolling of the “ohl” sound after the fashion of the Berliners (who constantly use the phrase “Ja wohl!” in conversation, and more or less prolong the syllable “ohl” according as they desire to express different shades of meaning or of mood).

At this the Baron and the Baroness faced sharply about, and almost fled in their alarm. Some of the bystanders gave vent to excited exclamations, and others remained staring at me in astonishment. But I do not remember the details very well.

Wheeling quietly about, I returned in the direction of Polina Alexandrovna. But, when I had got within a hundred paces of her seat, I saw her rise and set out with the children towards the hotel.

At the portico I caught up to her.

“I have perpetrated the—the piece of idiocy,” I said as I came level with her.

“Have you? Then you can take the consequences,” she replied without so much as looking at me. Then she moved towards the staircase.

I spent the rest of the evening walking in the park. Thence I passed into the forest, and walked on until I found myself in a neighbouring principality. At a wayside restaurant I partook of an omelette and some wine, and was charged for the idyllic repast a thaler and a half.

Not until eleven o’clock did I return home—to find a summons awaiting me from the General.

Our party occupied two suites in the hotel; each of which contained two rooms. The first (the larger suite) comprised a salon and a smoking-room, with, adjoining the

latter, the General's study. It was here that he was awaiting me as he stood posed in a majestic attitude beside his writing-table. Lolling on a divan close by was De Griers.

"My good sir," the General began, "may I ask you what this is that you have gone and done?"

"I should be glad," I replied, "if we could come straight to the point. Probably you are referring to my encounter of today with a German?"

"With a German? Why, the German was the Baron Burmergelm—a most important personage! I hear that you have been rude both to him and to the Baroness?"

"No, I have not."

"But I understand that you simply terrified them, my good sir?" shouted the General.

"Not in the least," I replied. "You must know that when I was in Berlin I frequently used to hear the Berliners repeat, and repellently prolong, a certain phrase—namely, 'Ja wohl!'; and, happening to meet this couple in the carriage-drive, I found, for some reason or another, that this phrase suddenly recurred to my memory, and exercised a rousing effect upon my spirits. Moreover, on the three previous occasions that I have met the Baroness she has walked towards me as though I were a worm which could easily be crushed with the foot. Not unnaturally, I too possess a measure of self-respect; wherefore, on this occasion I took off my hat, and said politely (yes, I assure you it was said politely): 'Madame, j'ai l'honneur d'être votre esclave.' Then the Baron turned round, and said 'Hein!'; whereupon I felt moved to ejaculate in answer 'Ja wohl!' Twice I shouted it at him—the first time in an ordinary tone, and the second time with the greatest prolonging of the words of which I was capable. That is all."

I must confess that this puerile explanation gave me great pleasure. I felt a strong desire to overlay the incident with an even added measure of grossness; so, the further I proceeded, the more did the gusto of my proceeding increase.

"You are only making fun of me!" vociferated the General as, turning to the Frenchman, he declared that my bringing about of the incident had been gratuitous. De Griers smiled contemptuously, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Do not think that," I put in. "It was not so at all. I grant you that my behaviour was bad—I fully confess that it was so, and make no secret of the fact. I would even go so far as to grant you that my behaviour might well be called stupid and indecent tomfoolery; but, more than that it was not. Also, let me tell you that I am very sorry for my conduct. Yet there is one circumstance which, in my eyes, almost absolves me from regret in the matter. Of late—that is to say, for the last two or three weeks—I have been feeling not at all well. That is to say, I have been in a sick, nervous, irritable, fanciful condition, so that I have periodically lost control over myself. For instance, on more than one occasion I have tried to pick a quarrel even with Monsieur le Marquise here; and, under the circumstances, he had no choice but to answer me. In short, I have recently been showing signs of ill-health. Whether the Baroness Burmergelm will take this circumstance into consideration when I come to beg her pardon (for I do intend to make her amends) I do not know; but I doubt if she will, and the less so since, so far as I know, the circumstance is one which, of late, has begun to be abused in the legal world, in that advocates in criminal cases have taken to justifying their clients on the ground that, at the moment of the crime, they (the clients) were unconscious of what they were doing—that, in short, they were out of health. 'My client committed the murder—that is true; but he has no recollection of having committed it.' And doctors actually support these advocates by affirming that there really is such a malady—that there really can arise temporary delusions which make a man remember nothing of a given deed, or only a half or a quarter of it! But the Baron and Baroness are members of an older generation, as well as Prussian Junkers and landowners. To them such a process in the medico-judicial world will be unknown, and therefore, they are the more unlikely to accept any such explanation. What is your opinion about it, General?"

“Enough, sir!” he thundered with barely restrained fury. “Enough, I say! Once and for all I must endeavour to rid myself of you and your impertinence. To justify yourself in the eyes of the Baron and Baroness will be impossible. Any intercourse with you, even though it be confined to a begging of their pardons, they would look upon as a degradation. I may tell you that, on learning that you formed part of my household, the Baron approached me in the Casino, and demanded of me additional satisfaction. Do you understand, then, what it is that you have entailed upon me—upon me, my good sir? You have entailed upon me the fact of my being forced to sue humbly to the Baron, and to give him my word of honour that this very day you shall cease to belong to my establishment!”

“Excuse me, General,” I interrupted, “but did he make an express point of it that I should ‘cease to belong to your establishment,’ as you call it?”

“No; I, of my own initiative, thought that I ought to afford him that satisfaction; and, with it he was satisfied. So we must part, good sir. It is my duty to hand over to you forty gülden, three florins, as per the accompanying statement. Here is the money, and here the account, which you are at liberty to verify. Farewell. From henceforth we are strangers. From you I have never had anything but trouble and unpleasantness. I am about to call the landlord, and explain to him that from tomorrow onwards I shall no longer be responsible for your hotel expenses. Also I have the honour to remain your obedient servant.”

I took the money and the account (which was indicted in pencil), and, bowing low to the General, said to him very gravely:

“The matter cannot end here. I regret very much that you should have been put to unpleasantness at the Baron’s hands; but, the fault (pardon me) is your own. How came you to answer for me to the Baron? And what did you mean by saying that I formed part of your household? I am merely your family tutor—not a son of yours, nor yet your ward, nor a person of any kind for whose acts you need be responsible. I am a judicially competent person, a man of twenty-five years of age, a university graduate, a gentleman, and, until I met yourself, a complete stranger to you. Only my boundless respect for your merits restrains me from demanding satisfaction at your hands, as

well as a further explanation as to the reasons which have led you to take it upon yourself to answer for my conduct."

So struck was he with my words that, spreading out his hands, he turned to the Frenchman, and interpreted to him that I had challenged himself (the General) to a duel. The Frenchman laughed aloud.

"Nor do I intend to let the Baron off," I continued calmly, but with not a little discomfiture at De Griers' merriment. "And since you, General, have today been so good as to listen to the Baron's complaints, and to enter into his concerns—since you have made yourself a participator in the affair—I have the honour to inform you that, tomorrow morning at the latest, I shall, in my own name, demand of the said Baron a formal explanation as to the reasons which have led him to disregard the fact that the matter lies between him and myself alone, and to put a slight upon me by referring it to another person, as though I were unworthy to answer for my own conduct."

Then there happened what I had foreseen. The General on hearing of this further intended outrage, showed the white feather.

"What?" he cried. "Do you intend to go on with this damned nonsense? Do you not realise the harm that it is doing me? I beg of you not to laugh at me, sir—not to laugh at me, for we have police authorities here who, out of respect for my rank, and for that of the Baron... In short, sir, I swear to you that I will have you arrested, and marched out of the place, to prevent any further brawling on your part. Do you understand what I say?" He was almost breathless with anger, as well as in a terrible fright.

"General," I replied with that calmness which he never could abide, "one cannot arrest a man for brawling until he has brawled. I have not so much as begun my explanations to the Baron, and you are altogether ignorant as to the form and time which my intended procedure is likely to assume. I wish but to disabuse the Baron of what is, to me, a shameful supposition—namely, that I am under the guardianship of a person who is qualified to exercise control over my free will. It is vain for you to disturb and alarm yourself."

“For God’s sake, Alexis Ivanovitch, do put an end to this senseless scheme of yours!” he muttered, but with a sudden change from a truculent tone to one of entreaty as he caught me by the hand. “Do you know what is likely to come of it? Merely further unpleasantness. You will agree with me, I am sure, that at present I ought to move with especial care—yes, with very especial care. You cannot be fully aware of how I am situated. When we leave this place I shall be ready to receive you back into my household; but, for the time being I— Well, I cannot tell you all my reasons.” With that he wound up in a despairing voice: “O Alexis Ivanovitch, Alexis Ivanovitch!”

I moved towards the door—begging him to be calm, and promising that everything should be done decently and in order; whereafter I departed.

Russians, when abroad, are over-apt to play the poltroon, to watch all their words, and to wonder what people are thinking of their conduct, or whether such and such a thing is comme il faut. In short, they are over-apt to cosset themselves, and to lay claim to great importance. Always they prefer the form of behaviour which has once and for all become accepted and established. This they will follow slavishly whether in hotels, on promenades, at meetings, or when on a journey. But the General had avowed to me that, over and above such considerations as these, there were circumstances which compelled him to “move with especial care at present”, and that the fact had actually made him poor-spirited and a coward—it had made him altogether change his tone towards me. This fact I took into my calculations, and duly noted it, for, of course, he might apply to the authorities tomorrow, and it behoved me to go carefully.

Yet it was not the General but Polina that I wanted to anger. She had treated me with such cruelty, and had got me into such a hole, that I felt a longing to force her to beseech me to stop. Of course, my tomfoolery might compromise her; yet certain other feelings and desires had begun to form themselves in my brain. If I was never to rank in her eyes as anything but a nonentity, it would not greatly matter if I figured as a draggle-tailed cockerel, and the Baron were to give me a good thrashing; but, the fact was that I desired to have the laugh of them all, and to come out myself unscathed. Let people see what they would see. Let Polina, for once, have a good fright, and be forced to whistle me to heel again. But, however much she might whistle, she should see that I was at least no draggle-tailed cockerel!

I have just received a surprising piece of news. I have just met our chambermaid on the stairs, and been informed by her that Maria Philipovna departed today, by the night train, to stay with a cousin at Carlsbad. What can that mean? The maid declares that Madame packed her trunks early in the day. Yet how is it that no one else seems to have been aware of the circumstance? Or is it that I have been the only person to be unaware of it? Also, the maid has just told me that, three days ago, Maria Philipovna had some high words with the General. I understand, then! Probably the words were concerning Mlle. Blanche. Certainly something decisive is approaching.

VII

In the morning I sent for the maître d'hôtel, and explained to him that, in future, my bill was to be rendered to me personally. As a matter of fact, my expenses had never been so large as to alarm me, nor to lead me to quit the hotel; while, moreover, I still had 160 gülden left to me, and—in them—yes, in them, perhaps, riches awaited me. It was a curious fact, that, though I had not yet won anything at play, I nevertheless acted, thought, and felt as though I were sure, before long, to become wealthy—since I could not imagine myself otherwise.

Next, I bethought me, despite the earliness of the hour, of going to see Mr. Astley, who was staying at the Hôtel de l'Angleterre (a hostelry at no great distance from our own). But suddenly De Griers entered my room. This had never before happened, for of late that gentleman and I had stood on the most strained and distant of terms—he attempting no concealment of his contempt for me (he even made an express point of showing it), and I having no reason to desire his company. In short, I detested him. Consequently, his entry at the present moment the more astounded me. At once I divined that something out of the way was on the carpet.

He entered with marked affability, and began by complimenting me on my room. Then, perceiving that I had my hat in my hands, he inquired whither I was going so early; and, no sooner did he hear that I was bound for Mr. Astley's than he stopped, looked grave, and seemed plunged in thought.

He was a true Frenchman insofar as that, though he could be lively and engaging when it suited him, he became insufferably dull and wearisome as soon as ever the need for being lively and engaging had passed. Seldom is a Frenchman naturally civil: he is civil only as though to order and of set purpose. Also, if he thinks it incumbent upon him to be fanciful, original, and out of the way, his fancy always assumes a foolish, unnatural vein, for the reason that it is compounded of trite, hackneyed forms. In short, the natural Frenchman is a conglomeration of commonplace, petty, everyday positiveness, so that he is the most tedious person in the world. Indeed, I believe that none but greenhorns and excessively Russian people feel an attraction towards the French; for, to any man of sensibility, such a compendium of outworn forms—a compendium which is built up of drawing-room manners, expansiveness, and gaiety—becomes at once over-noticeable and unbearable.

"I have come to see you on business," De Griers began in a very off-hand, yet polite, tone; "nor will I seek to conceal from you the fact that I have come in the capacity of an emissary, of an intermediary, from the General. Having small knowledge of the Russian tongue, I lost most of what was said last night; but, the General has now explained matters, and I must confess that—"

"See here, Monsieur de Griers," I interrupted. "I understand that you have undertaken to act in this affair as an intermediary. Of course I am only 'un utchitel,' a tutor, and have never claimed to be an intimate of this household, nor to stand on at all familiar terms with it. Consequently, I do not know the whole of its circumstances. Yet pray explain to me this: have you yourself become one of its members, seeing that you are beginning to take such a part in everything, and are now present as an intermediary?"

The Frenchman seemed not over-pleased at my question. It was one which was too outspoken for his taste—and he had no mind to be frank with me.

"I am connected with the General," he said drily, "partly through business affairs, and partly through special circumstances. My principal has sent me merely to ask you to forego your intentions of last evening. What you contemplate is, I have no doubt, very clever; yet he has charged me to represent to you that you have not the slightest chance of succeeding in your end, since not only will the Baron refuse to receive you,

but also he (the Baron) has at his disposal every possible means for obviating further unpleasantness from you. Surely you can see that yourself? What, then, would be the good of going on with it all? On the other hand, the General promises that at the first favourable opportunity he will receive you back into his household, and, in the meantime, will credit you with your salary—with 'vos appointements.' Surely that will suit you, will it not?"

Very quietly I replied that he (the Frenchman) was labouring under a delusion; that perhaps, after all, I should not be expelled from the Baron's presence, but, on the contrary, be listened to; finally, that I should be glad if Monsieur de Griers would confess that he was now visiting me merely in order to see how far I intended to go in the affair.

"Good heavens!" cried de Griers. "Seeing that the General takes such an interest in the matter, is there anything very unnatural in his desiring also to know your plans?"

Again I began my explanations, but the Frenchman only fidgeted and rolled his head about as he listened with an expression of manifest and unconcealed irony on his face. In short, he adopted a supercilious attitude. For my own part, I endeavoured to pretend that I took the affair very seriously. I declared that, since the Baron had gone and complained of me to the General, as though I were a mere servant of the General's, he had, in the first place, lost me my post, and, in the second place, treated me like a person to whom, as to one not qualified to answer for himself, it was not even worth while to speak. Naturally, I said, I felt insulted at this. Yet, comprehending as I did, differences of years, of social status, and so forth (here I could scarcely help smiling), I was not anxious to bring about further scenes by going personally to demand or to request satisfaction of the Baron. All that I felt was that I had a right to go in person and beg the Baron's and the Baroness's pardon—the more so since, of late, I had been feeling unwell and unstrung, and had been in a fanciful condition. And so forth, and so forth. Yet (I continued) the Baron's offensive behaviour to me of yesterday (that is to say, the fact of his referring the matter to the General) as well as his insistence that the General should deprive me of my post, had placed me in such a position that I could not well express my regret to him (the Baron) and to his good lady, for the reason that in all probability both he and the Baroness, with the world at large, would imagine that I was doing so merely because I hoped, by my action, to recover

my post. Hence, I found myself forced to request the Baron to express to me his own regrets, as well as to express them in the most unqualified manner—to say, in fact, that he had never had any wish to insult me. After the Baron had done that, I should, for my part, at once feel free to express to him, whole-heartedly and without reserve, my own regrets. “In short,” I declared in conclusion, “my one desire is that the Baron may make it possible for me to adopt the latter course.”

“Oh fie! What refinements and subtleties!” exclaimed De Griers. “Besides, what have you to express regret for? Confess, Monsieur, Monsieur—pardon me, but I have forgotten your name—confess, I say, that all this is merely a plan to annoy the General? Or perhaps, you have some other and special end in view? Eh?”

“In return you must pardon me, mon cher Marquis, and tell me what you have to do with it.”

“The General—”

“But what of the General? Last night he said that, for some reason or another, it behoved him to ‘move with especial care at present;’ wherefore, he was feeling nervous. But I did not understand the reference.”

“Yes, there do exist special reasons for his doing so,” assented De Griers in a conciliatory tone, yet with rising anger. “You are acquainted with Mlle. de Cominges, are you not?”

“Mlle. Blanche, you mean?”

“Yes, Mlle. Blanche de Cominges. Doubtless you know also that the General is in love with this young lady, and may even be about to marry her before he leaves here? Imagine, therefore, what any scene or scandal would entail upon him!”

“I cannot see that the marriage scheme need, be affected by scenes or scandals.”

“Mais le Baron est si irascible—un caractère prussien, vous savez! Enfin il fera une querelle d’Allemand.”

“I do not care,” I replied, “seeing that I no longer belong to his household” (of set purpose I was trying to talk as senselessly as possible). “But is it quite settled that Mlle. is to marry the General? What are they waiting for? Why should they conceal such a matter—at all events from ourselves, the General’s own party?”

“I cannot tell you. The marriage is not yet a settled affair, for they are awaiting news from Russia. The General has business transactions to arrange.”

“Ah! Connected, doubtless, with madame his mother?”

De Griers shot at me a glance of hatred.

“To cut things short,” he interrupted, “I have complete confidence in your native politeness, as well as in your tact and good sense. I feel sure that you will do what I suggest, even if it is only for the sake of this family which has received you as a kinsman into its bosom and has always loved and respected you.”

“Be so good as to observe,” I remarked, “that the same family has just expelled me from its bosom. All that you are saying you are saying but for show; but, when people have just said to you, ‘Of course we do not wish to turn you out, yet, for the sake of appearance’s, you must permit yourself to be turned out,’ nothing can matter very much.”

“Very well, then,” he said, in a sterner and more arrogant tone. “Seeing that my solicitations have had no effect upon you, it is my duty to mention that other

measures will be taken. There exist here police, you must remember, and this very day they shall send you packing. Que diable! To think of a blanc bec like yourself challenging a person like the Baron to a duel! Do you suppose that you will be allowed to do such things? Just try doing them, and see if any one will be afraid of you! The reason why I have asked you to desist is that I can see that your conduct is causing the General annoyance. Do you believe that the Baron could not tell his lacquey simply to put you out of doors?"

"Nevertheless I should not GO out of doors," I retorted with absolute calm. "You are labouring under a delusion, Monsieur de Griers. The thing will be done in far better trim than you imagine. I was just about to start for Mr. Astley's, to ask him to be my intermediary—in other words, my second. He has a strong liking for me, and I do not think that he will refuse. He will go and see the Baron on MY behalf, and the Baron will certainly not decline to receive him. Although I am only a tutor—a kind of subaltern, Mr. Astley is known to all men as the nephew of a real English lord, the Lord Piebroch, as well as a lord in his own right. Yes, you may be pretty sure that the Baron will be civil to Mr. Astley, and listen to him. Or, should he decline to do so, Mr. Astley will take the refusal as a personal affront to himself (for you know how persistent the English are?) and thereupon introduce to the Baron a friend of his own (and he has many friends in a good position). That being so, picture to yourself the issue of the affair—an affair which will not quite end as you think it will."

This caused the Frenchman to bethink him of playing the coward. "Really things may be as this fellow says," he evidently thought. "Really he might be able to engineer another scene."

"Once more I beg of you to let the matter drop," he continued in a tone that was now entirely conciliatory. "One would think that it actually pleased you to have scenes! Indeed, it is a brawl rather than genuine satisfaction that you are seeking. I have said that the affair may prove to be diverting, and even clever, and that possibly you may attain something by it; yet none the less I tell you" (he said this only because he saw me rise and reach for my hat) "that I have come hither also to hand you these few words from a certain person. Read them, please, for I must take her back an answer."

So saying, he took from his pocket a small, compact, wafer-sealed note, and handed it to me. In Polina's handwriting I read:

"I hear that you are thinking of going on with this affair. You have lost your temper now, and are beginning to play the fool! Certain circumstances, however, I may explain to you later. Pray cease from your folly, and put a check upon yourself. For folly it all is. I have need of you, and, moreover, you have promised to obey me. Remember the Shlangenberg. I ask you to be obedient. If necessary, I shall even bid you be obedient.—Your own

POLINA.

"P.S.—If so be that you still bear a grudge against me for what happened last night, pray forgive me."

Everything, to my eyes, seemed to change as I read these words. My lips grew pale, and I began to tremble. Meanwhile, the cursed Frenchman was eyeing me discreetly and askance, as though he wished to avoid witnessing my confusion. It would have been better if he had laughed outright.

"Very well," I said, "you can tell Mlle. not to disturb herself. But," I added sharply, "I would also ask you why you have been so long in handing me this note? Instead of chattering about trifles, you ought to have delivered me the missive at once—if you have really come commissioned as you say."

"Well, pardon some natural haste on my part, for the situation is so strange. I wished first to gain some personal knowledge of your intentions; and, moreover, I did not know the contents of the note, and thought that it could be given you at any time."

“I understand,” I replied. “So you were ordered to hand me the note only in the last resort, and if you could not otherwise appease me? Is it not so? Speak out, Monsieur de Griers.”

“Perhaps,” said he, assuming a look of great forbearance, but gazing at me in a meaning way.

I reached for my hat; whereupon he nodded, and went out. Yet on his lips I fancied that I could see a mocking smile. How could it have been otherwise?

“You and I are to have a reckoning later, Master Frenchman,” I muttered as I descended the stairs. “Yes, we will measure our strength together.” Yet my thoughts were all in confusion, for again something seemed to have struck me dizzy. Presently the air revived me a little, and, a couple of minutes later, my brain had sufficiently cleared to enable two ideas in particular to stand out in it. Firstly, I asked myself, which of the absurd, boyish, and extravagant threats which I had uttered at random last night had made everybody so alarmed? Secondly, what was the influence which this Frenchman appeared to exercise over Polina? He had but to give the word, and at once she did as he desired—at once she wrote me a note to beg of me to forbear! Of course, the relations between the pair had, from the first, been a riddle to me—they had been so ever since I had first made their acquaintance. But of late I had remarked in her a strong aversion for, even a contempt for—him, while, for his part, he had scarcely even looked at her, but had behaved towards her always in the most churlish fashion. Yes, I had noted that. Also, Polina herself had mentioned to me her dislike for him, and delivered herself of some remarkable confessions on the subject. Hence, he must have got her into his power somehow—somehow he must be holding her as in a vice.

VIII

All at once, on the Promenade, as it was called—that is to say, in the Chestnut Avenue—I came face to face with my Englishman.

“I was just coming to see you,” he said; “and you appear to be out on a similar errand. So you have parted with your employers?”

“How do you know that?” I asked in astonishment. “Is every one aware of the fact?”

“By no means. Not every one would consider such a fact to be of moment. Indeed, I have never heard any one speak of it.”

“Then how come you to know it?”

“Because I have had occasion to do so. Whither are you bound? I like you, and was therefore coming to pay you a visit.”

“What a splendid fellow you are, Mr. Astley!” I cried, though still wondering how he had come by his knowledge. “And since I have not yet had my coffee, and you have, in all probability, scarcely tasted yours, let us adjourn to the Casino Café, where we can sit and smoke and have a talk.”

The café in question was only a hundred paces away; so, when coffee had been brought, we seated ourselves, and I lit a cigarette. Astley was no smoker, but, taking a seat by my side, he prepared himself to listen.

“I do not intend to go away,” was my first remark. “I intend, on the contrary, to remain here.”

“That I never doubted,” he answered good-humouredly.

It is a curious fact that, on my way to see him, I had never even thought of telling him of my love for Polina. In fact, I had purposely meant to avoid any mention of the

subject. Nor, during our stay in the place, had I ever made aught but the scantiest reference to it. You see, not only was Astley a man of great reserve, but also from the first I had perceived that Polina had made a great impression upon him, although he never spoke of her. But now, strangely enough, he had no sooner seated himself and bent his steely gaze upon me, than, for some reason or another, I felt moved to tell him everything—to speak to him of my love in all its phases. For an hour and a half did I discourse on the subject, and found it a pleasure to do so, even though this was the first occasion on which I had referred to the matter. Indeed, when, at certain moments, I perceived that my more ardent passages confused him, I purposely increased my ardour of narration. Yet one thing I regret: and that is that I made references to the Frenchman which were a little over-personal.

Mr. Astley sat without moving as he listened to me. Not a word nor a sound of any kind did he utter as he stared into my eyes. Suddenly, however, on my mentioning the Frenchman, he interrupted me, and inquired sternly whether I did right to speak of an extraneous matter (he had always been a strange man in his mode of propounding questions).

“No, I fear not,” I replied.

“And concerning this Marquis and Mlle. Polina you know nothing beyond surmise?”

Again I was surprised that such a categorical question should come from such a reserved individual.

“No, I know nothing for certain about them” was my reply. “No—nothing.”

“Then you have done very wrong to speak of them to me, or even to imagine things about them.”

“Quite so, quite so,” I interrupted in some astonishment. “I admit that. Yet that is not the question.” Whereupon I related to him in detail the incident of two days ago. I spoke of Polina’s outburst, of my encounter with the Baron, of my dismissal, of the General’s extraordinary pusillanimity, and of the call which De Griers had that morning paid me. In conclusion, I showed Astley the note which I had lately received.

“What do you make of it?” I asked. “When I met you I was just coming to ask you your opinion. For myself, I could have killed this Frenchman, and am not sure that I shall not do so even yet.”

“I feel the same about it,” said Mr. Astley. “As for Mlle. Polina—well, you yourself know that, if necessity drives, one enters into relation with people whom one simply detests. Even between this couple there may be something which, though unknown to you, depends upon extraneous circumstances. For, my own part, I think that you may reassure yourself—or at all events partially. And as for Mlle. Polina’s proceedings of two days ago, they were, of course, strange; not because she can have meant to get rid of you, or to earn for you a thrashing from the Baron’s cudgel (which for some curious reason, he did not use, although he had it ready in his hands), but because such proceedings on the part of such—well, of such a refined lady as Mlle. Polina are, to say the least of it, unbecoming. But she cannot have guessed that you would carry out her absurd wish to the letter?”

“Do you know what?” suddenly I cried as I fixed Mr. Astley with my gaze. “I believe that you have already heard the story from some one—very possibly from Mlle. Polina herself?”

In return he gave me an astonished stare.

“Your eyes look very fiery,” he said with a return of his former calm, “and in them I can read suspicion. Now, you have no right whatever to be suspicious. It is not a right which I can for a moment recognise, and I absolutely refuse to answer your questions.”

“Enough! You need say no more,” I cried with a strange emotion at my heart, yet not altogether understanding what had aroused that emotion in my breast. Indeed, when, where, and how could Polina have chosen Astley to be one of her confidants? Of late I had come rather to overlook him in this connection, even though Polina had always been a riddle to me—so much so that now, when I had just permitted myself to tell my friend of my infatuation in all its aspects, I had found myself struck, during the very telling, with the fact that in my relations with her I could specify nothing that was explicit, nothing that was positive. On the contrary, my relations had been purely fantastic, strange, and unreal; they had been unlike anything else that I could think of.

“Very well, very well,” I replied with a warmth equal to Astley’s own. “Then I stand confounded, and have no further opinions to offer. But you are a good fellow, and I am glad to know what you think about it all, even though I do not need your advice.”

Then, after a pause, I resumed:

“For instance, what reason should you assign for the General taking fright in this way? Why should my stupid clowning have led the world to elevate it into a serious incident? Even De Griers has found it necessary to put in his oar (and he only interferes on the most important occasions), and to visit me, and to address to me the most earnest supplications. Yes, he, De Griers, has actually been playing the suppliant to me! And, mark you, although he came to me as early as nine o’clock, he had ready-prepared in his hand Mlle. Polina’s note. When, I would ask, was that note written? Mlle. Polina must have been aroused from sleep for the express purpose of writing it. At all events the circumstance shows that she is an absolute slave to the Frenchman, since she actually begs my pardon in the note—actually begs my pardon! Yet what is her personal concern in the matter? Why is she interested in it at all? Why, too, is the whole party so afraid of this precious Baron? And what sort of a business do you call it for the General to be going to marry Mlle. Blanche de Cominges? He told me last night that, because of the circumstance, he must ‘move with especial care at present.’ What is your opinion of it all? Your look convinces me that you know more about it than I do.”

Mr. Astley smiled and nodded.

“Yes, I think I do know more about it than you do,” he assented. “The affair centres around this Mlle. Blanche. Of that I feel certain.”

“And what of Mlle. Blanche?” I cried impatiently (for in me there had dawned a sudden hope that this would enable me to discover something about Polina).

“Well, my belief is that at the present moment Mlle. Blanche has, in very truth, a special reason for wishing to avoid any trouble with the Baron and the Baroness. It might lead not only to some unpleasantness, but even to a scandal.”

“Oh, oh!”

“Also I may tell you that Mlle. Blanche has been in Roulettenberg before, for she was staying here three seasons ago. I myself was in the place at the time, and in those days Mlle. Blanche was not known as Mlle. de Cominges, nor was her mother, the Widow de Cominges, even in existence. In any case no one ever mentioned the latter. De Griers, too, had not materialised, and I am convinced that not only do the parties stand in no relation to one another, but also they have not long enjoyed one another’s acquaintance. Likewise, the Marquisate de Griers is of recent creation. Of that I have reason to be sure, owing to a certain circumstance. Even the name De Griers itself may be taken to be a new invention, seeing that I have a friend who once met the said ‘Marquis’ under a different name altogether.”

“Yet he possesses a good circle of friends?”

“Possibly. Mlle. Blanche also may possess that. Yet it is not three years since she received from the local police, at the instance of the Baroness, an invitation to leave the town. And she left it.”

“But why?”

“Well, I must tell you that she first appeared here in company with an Italian—a prince of some sort, a man who bore an historic name (Barberini or something of the kind). The fellow was simply a mass of rings and diamonds—real diamonds, too—and the couple used to drive out in a marvellous carriage. At first Mlle. Blanche played ‘trente et quarante’ with fair success, but, later, her luck took a marked change for the worse. I distinctly remember that in a single evening she lost an enormous sum. But worse was to ensue, for one fine morning her prince disappeared—horses, carriage, and all. Also, the hotel bill which he left unpaid was enormous. Upon this Mlle. Zelma (the name which she assumed after figuring as Madame Barberini) was in despair. She shrieked and howled all over the hotel, and even tore her clothes in her frenzy. In the hotel there was staying also a Polish count (you must know that ALL travelling Poles are counts!), and the spectacle of Mlle. Zelma tearing her clothes and, catlike, scratching her face with her beautiful, scented nails produced upon him a strong impression. So the pair had a talk together, and, by luncheon time, she was consoled. Indeed, that evening the couple entered the Casino arm-in-arm—Mlle. Zelma laughing loudly, according to her custom, and showing even more expansiveness in her manners than she had before shown. For instance, she thrust her way into the file of women roulette-players in the exact fashion of those ladies who, to clear a space for themselves at the tables, push their fellow-players roughly aside. Doubtless you have noticed them?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Well, they are not worth noticing. To the annoyance of the decent public they are allowed to remain here—at all events such of them as daily change 4000 franc notes at the tables (though, as soon as ever these women cease to do so, they receive an invitation to depart). However, Mlle. Zelma continued to change notes of this kind, but her play grew more and more unsuccessful, despite the fact that such ladies’ luck is frequently good, for they have a surprising amount of cash at their disposal. Suddenly, the Count too disappeared, even as the Prince had done, and that same evening Mlle. Zelma was forced to appear in the Casino alone. On this occasion no one offered her a greeting. Two days later she had come to the end of her resources; whereupon, after staking and losing her last louis d’or she chanced to look around her, and saw standing by her side the Baron Burmergelm, who had been eyeing her with fixed disapproval. To his distaste, however, Mlle. paid no attention, but, turning to him with

her well-known smile, requested him to stake, on her behalf, ten louis on the red. Later that evening a complaint from the Baroness led the authorities to request Mlle. not to re-enter the Casino. If you feel in any way surprised that I should know these petty and unedifying details, the reason is that I had them from a relative of mine who, later that evening, drove Mlle. Zelma in his carriage from Roulettenberg to Spa. Now, mark you, Mlle. wants to become Madame General, in order that, in future, she may be spared the receipt of such invitations from Casino authorities as she received three years ago. At present she is not playing; but that is only because, according to the signs, she is lending money to other players. Yes, that is a much more paying game. I even suspect that the unfortunate General is himself in her debt, as well as, perhaps, also De Griers. Or, it may be that the latter has entered into a partnership with her. Consequently you yourself will see that, until the marriage shall have been consummated, Mlle. would scarcely like to have the attention of the Baron and the Baroness drawn to herself. In short, to any one in her position, a scandal would be most detrimental. You form a member of the ménage of these people; wherefore, any act of yours might cause such a scandal—and the more so since daily she appears in public arm in arm with the General or with Mlle. Polina. Now do you understand?"

"No, I do not!" I shouted as I banged my fist down upon the table—banged it with such violence that a frightened waiter came running towards us. "Tell me, Mr. Astley, why, if you knew this history all along, and, consequently, always knew who this Mlle. Blanche is, you never warned either myself or the General, nor, most of all, Mlle. Polina" (who is accustomed to appear in the Casino—in public everywhere with Mlle. Blanche). "How could you do it?"

"It would have done no good to warn you," he replied quietly, "for the reason that you could have effected nothing. Against what was I to warn you? As likely as not, the General knows more about Mlle. Blanche even than I do; yet the unhappy man still walks about with her and Mlle. Polina. Only yesterday I saw this Frenchwoman riding, splendidly mounted, with De Griers, while the General was careering in their wake on a roan horse. He had said, that morning, that his legs were hurting him, yet his riding-seat was easy enough. As he passed I looked at him, and the thought occurred to me that he was a man lost for ever. However, it is no affair of mine, for I have only recently had the happiness to make Mlle. Polina's acquaintance. Also"—he added this as an afterthought—"I have already told you that I do not recognise your right to ask me certain questions, however sincere be my liking for you."

“Enough,” I said, rising. “To me it is as clear as day that Mlle. Polina knows all about this Mlle. Blanche, but cannot bring herself to part with her Frenchman; wherefore, she consents also to be seen in public with Mlle. Blanche. You may be sure that nothing else would ever have induced her either to walk about with this Frenchwoman or to send me a note not to touch the Baron. Yes, it is there that the influence lies before which everything in the world must bow! Yet she herself it was who launched me at the Baron! The devil take it, but I was left no choice in the matter.”

“You forget, in the first place, that this Mlle. de Cominges is the General’s inamorata, and, in the second place, that Mlle. Polina, the General’s step-daughter, has a younger brother and sister who, though they are the General’s own children, are completely neglected by this madman, and robbed as well.”

“Yes, yes; that is so. For me to go and desert the children now would mean their total abandonment; whereas, if I remain, I should be able to defend their interests, and, perhaps, to save a moiety of their property. Yes, yes; that is quite true. And yet, and yet—Oh, I can well understand why they are all so interested in the General’s mother!”

“In whom?” asked Mr. Astley.

“In the old woman of Moscow who declines to die, yet concerning whom they are for ever expecting telegrams to notify the fact of her death.”

“Ah, then of course their interests centre around her. It is a question of succession. Let that but be settled, and the General will marry, Mlle. Polina will be set free, and De Griers—”

“Yes, and De Griers?”

“Will be repaid his money, which is what he is now waiting for.”

“What? You think that he is waiting for that?”

“I know of nothing else,” asserted Mr. Astley doggedly.

“But, I do, I do!” I shouted in my fury. “He is waiting also for the old woman’s will, for the reason that it awards Mlle. Polina a dowry. As soon as ever the money is received, she will throw herself upon the Frenchman’s neck. All women are like that. Even the proudest of them become abject slaves where marriage is concerned. What Polina is good for is to fall head over ears in love. That is my opinion. Look at her—especially when she is sitting alone, and plunged in thought. All this was pre-ordained and foretold, and is accursed. Polina could perpetrate any mad act. She—she—But who called me by name?” I broke off. “Who is shouting for me? I heard some one calling in Russian, ‘Alexis Ivanovitch!’ It was a woman’s voice. Listen!”

At the moment, we were approaching my hotel. We had left the café long ago, without even noticing that we had done so.

“Yes, I did hear a woman’s voice calling, but whose I do not know. The someone was calling you in Russian. Ah! NOW I can see whence the cries come. They come from that lady there—the one who is sitting on the settee, the one who has just been escorted to the verandah by a crowd of lacqueys. Behind her see that pile of luggage! She must have arrived by train.”

“But why should she be calling me? Hear her calling again! See! She is beckoning to us!”

“Yes, so she is,” assented Mr. Astley.

“Alexis Ivanovitch, Alexis Ivanovitch! Good heavens, what a stupid fellow!” came in a despairing wail from the verandah.

We had almost reached the portico, and I was just setting foot upon the space before it, when my hands fell to my sides in limp astonishment, and my feet glued themselves to the pavement!

IX

For on the topmost tier of the hotel verandah, after being carried up the steps in an armchair amid a bevy of footmen, maid-servants, and other menials of the hotel, headed by the landlord (that functionary had actually run out to meet a visitor who arrived with so much stir and din, attended by her own retinue, and accompanied by so great a pile of trunks and portmanteaux)—on the topmost tier of the verandah, I say, there was sitting—the grandmother! Yes, it was she—rich, and imposing, and seventy-five years of age—Antonida Vassilievna Tarassevitcha, landowner and grande dame of Moscow—the "La Baboulenka" who had caused so many telegrams to be sent off and received—who had been dying, yet not dying—who had, in her own person, descended upon us even as snow might fall from the clouds! Though unable to walk, she had arrived borne aloft in an armchair (her mode of conveyance for the last five years), as brisk, aggressive, self-satisfied, bolt-upright, loudly imperious, and generally abusive as ever. In fact, she looked exactly as she had on the only two occasions when I had seen her since my appointment to the General's household. Naturally enough, I stood petrified with astonishment. She had sighted me a hundred paces off! Even while she was being carried along in her chair she had recognised me, and called me by name and surname (which, as usual, after hearing once, she had remembered ever afterwards).

"And this is the woman whom they had thought to see in her grave after making her will!" I thought to myself. "Yet she will outlive us, and every one else in the hotel. Good Lord! what is going to become of us now? What on earth is to happen to the General? She will turn the place upside down!"

"My good sir," the old woman continued in a stentorian voice, "what are you standing there for, with your eyes almost falling out of your head? Cannot you come and say how-do-you-do? Are you too proud to shake hands? Or do you not recognise me? Here, Potapitch!" she cried to an old servant who, dressed in a frock coat and white

waistcoat, had a bald, red head (he was the chamberlain who always accompanied her on her journeys). “Just think! Alexis Ivanovitch does not recognise me! They have buried me for good and all! Yes, and after sending hosts of telegrams to know if I were dead or not! Yes, yes, I have heard the whole story. I am very much alive, though, as you may see.”

“Pardon me, Antonida Vassilievna,” I replied good humouredly as I recovered my presence of mind. “I have no reason to wish you ill. I am merely rather astonished to see you. Why should I not be so, seeing how unexpected—”

“Why should you be astonished? I just got into my chair, and came. Things are quiet enough in the train, for there is no one there to chatter. Have you been out for a walk?”

“Yes. I have just been to the Casino.”

“Oh? Well, it is quite nice here,” she went on as she looked about her. “The place seems comfortable, and all the trees are out. I like it very well. Are your people at home? Is the General, for instance, indoors?”

“Yes; and probably all of them.”

“Do they observe the convenances, and keep up appearances? Such things always give one tone. I have heard that they are keeping a carriage, even as Russian gentlefolks ought to do. When abroad, our Russian people always cut a dash. Is Prascovia here too?”

“Yes. Polina Alexandrovna is here.”

“And the Frenchwoman? However, I will go and look for them myself. Tell me the nearest way to their rooms. Do you like being here?”

“Yes, I thank you, Antonida Vassilievna.”

“And you, Potapitch, you go and tell that fool of a landlord to reserve me a suitable suite of rooms. They must be handsomely decorated, and not too high up. Have my luggage taken up to them. But what are you tumbling over yourselves for? Why are you all tearing about? What scullions these fellows are!—Who is that with you?” she added to myself.

“A Mr. Astley,” I replied.

“And who is Mr. Astley?”

“A fellow-traveller, and my very good friend, as well as an acquaintance of the General’s.”

“Oh, an Englishman? Then that is why he stared at me without even opening his lips. However, I like Englishmen. Now, take me upstairs, direct to their rooms. Where are they lodging?”

Madame was lifted up in her chair by the lacqueys, and I preceded her up the grand staircase. Our progress was exceedingly effective, for everyone whom we met stopped to stare at the cortège. It happened that the hotel had the reputation of being the best, the most expensive, and the most aristocratic in all the spa, and at every turn on the staircase or in the corridors we encountered fine ladies and important-looking Englishmen—more than one of whom hastened downstairs to inquire of the awestruck landlord who the newcomer was. To all such questions he returned the same answer—namely, that the old lady was an influential foreigner, a Russian, a Countess, and a grande dame, and that she had taken the suite which, during the previous week, had been tenanted by the Grande Duchesse de N.

Meanwhile the cause of the sensation—the Grandmother—was being borne aloft in her armchair. Every person whom she met she scanned with an inquisitive eye, after first of all interrogating me about him or her at the top of her voice. She was stout of figure, and, though she could not leave her chair, one felt, the moment that one first looked at her, that she was also tall of stature. Her back was as straight as a board, and never did she lean back in her seat. Also, her large grey head, with its keen, rugged features, remained always erect as she glanced about her in an imperious, challenging sort of way, with looks and gestures that clearly were unstudied. Though she had reached her seventy-sixth year, her face was still fresh, and her teeth had not decayed. Lastly, she was dressed in a black silk gown and white mobcap.

"She interests me tremendously," whispered Mr. Astley as, still smoking, he walked by my side. Meanwhile I was reflecting that probably the old lady knew all about the telegrams, and even about De Griers, though little or nothing about Mlle. Blanche. I said as much to Mr. Astley.

But what a frail creature is man! No sooner was my first surprise abated than I found myself rejoicing in the shock which we were about to administer to the General. So much did the thought inspire me that I marched ahead in the gayest of fashions.

Our party was lodging on the third floor. Without knocking at the door, or in any way announcing our presence, I threw open the portals, and the Grandmother was borne through them in triumph. As though of set purpose, the whole party chanced at that moment to be assembled in the General's study. The time was eleven o'clock, and it seemed that an outing of some sort (at which a portion of the party were to drive in carriages, and others to ride on horseback, accompanied by one or two extraneous acquaintances) was being planned. The General was present, and also Polina, the children, the latter's nurses, De Griers, Mlle. Blanche (attired in a riding-habit), her mother, the young Prince, and a learned German whom I beheld for the first time. Into the midst of this assembly the lacqueys conveyed Madame in her chair, and set her down within three paces of the General!

Good heavens! Never shall I forget the spectacle which ensued! Just before our entry, the General had been holding forth to the company, with De Griers in support of him. I

may also mention that, for the last two or three days, Mlle. Blanche and De Griers had been making a great deal of the young Prince, under the very nose of the poor General. In short, the company, though decorous and conventional, was in a gay, familiar mood. But no sooner did the Grandmother appear than the General stopped dead in the middle of a word, and, with jaw dropping, stared hard at the old lady—his eyes almost starting out of his head, and his expression as spellbound as though he had just seen a basilisk. In return, the Grandmother stared at him silently and without moving—though with a look of mingled challenge, triumph, and ridicule in her eyes. For ten seconds did the pair remain thus eyeing one another, amid the profound silence of the company; and even De Griers sat petrified—an extraordinary look of uneasiness dawning on his face. As for Mlle. Blanche, she too stared wildly at the Grandmother, with eyebrows raised and her lips parted—while the Prince and the German savant contemplated the tableau in profound amazement. Only Polina looked anything but perplexed or surprised. Presently, however, she too turned as white as a sheet, and then reddened to her temples. Truly the Grandmother's arrival seemed to be a catastrophe for everybody! For my own part, I stood looking from the Grandmother to the company, and back again, while Mr. Astley, as usual, remained in the background, and gazed calmly and decorously at the scene.

"Well, here I am—and instead of a telegram, too!" the Grandmother at last ejaculated, to dissipate the silence. "What? You were not expecting me?"

"Antonida Vassilievna! O my dearest mother! But how on earth did you, did you—?" The mutterings of the unhappy General died away.

I verily believe that if the Grandmother had held her tongue a few seconds longer she would have had a stroke.

"How on earth did I what?" she exclaimed. "Why, I just got into the train and came here. What else is the railway meant for? But you thought that I had turned up my toes and left my property to the lot of you. Oh, I know all about the telegrams which you have been dispatching. They must have cost you a pretty sum, I should think, for telegrams are not sent from abroad for nothing. Well, I picked up my heels, and came here. Who is this Frenchman? Monsieur de Griers, I suppose?"

“Oui, madame,” assented De Griers. “Et, croyez, je suis si enchanté! Votre santé—c’est un miracle vous voir ici. Une surprise charmante!”

“Just so. ‘Charmante!’ I happen to know you as a mountebank, and therefore trust you no more than this.” She indicated her little finger. “And who is that?” she went on, turning towards Mlle. Blanche. Evidently the Frenchwoman looked so becoming in her riding-habit, with her whip in her hand, that she had made an impression upon the old lady. “Who is that woman there?”

“Mlle. de Cominges,” I said. “And this is her mother, Madame de Cominges. They also are staying in the hotel.”

“Is the daughter married?” asked the old lady, without the least semblance of ceremony.

“No,” I replied as respectfully as possible, but under my breath.

“Is she good company?”

I failed to understand the question.

“I mean, is she or is she not a bore? Can she speak Russian? When this De Griers was in Moscow he soon learnt to make himself understood.”

I explained to the old lady that Mlle. Blanche had never visited Russia.

“Bonjour, then,” said Madame, with sudden brusquerie.

“Bonjour, madame,” replied Mlle. Blanche with an elegant, ceremonious bow as, under cover of an unwonted modesty, she endeavoured to express, both in face and figure, her extreme surprise at such strange behaviour on the part of the Grandmother.

“How the woman sticks out her eyes at me! How she mows and minces!” was the Grandmother’s comment. Then she turned suddenly to the General, and continued: “I have taken up my abode here, so am going to be your next-door neighbour. Are you glad to hear that, or are you not?”

“My dear mother, believe me when I say that I am sincerely delighted,” returned the General, who had now, to a certain extent, recovered his senses; and inasmuch as, when occasion arose, he could speak with fluency, gravity, and a certain effect, he set himself to be expansive in his remarks, and went on: “We have been so dismayed and upset by the news of your indisposition! We had received such hopeless telegrams about you! Then suddenly—”

“Fibs, fibs!” interrupted the Grandmother.

“How on earth, too, did you come to decide upon the journey?” continued the General, with raised voice as he hurried to overlook the old lady’s last remark. “Surely, at your age, and in your present state of health, the thing is so unexpected that our surprise is at least intelligible. However, I am glad to see you (as indeed, are we all”—he said this with a dignified, yet conciliatory, smile), “and will use my best endeavours to render your stay here as pleasant as possible.”

“Enough! All this is empty chatter. You are talking the usual nonsense. I shall know quite well how to spend my time. How did I come to undertake the journey, you ask? Well, is there anything so very surprising about it? It was done quite simply. What is every one going into ecstasies about?—How do you do, Prascovia? What are you doing here?”

“And how are you, Grandmother?” replied Polina, as she approached the old lady. “Were you long on the journey?”

“The most sensible question that I have yet been asked! Well, you shall hear for yourself how it all happened. I lay and lay, and was doctored and doctored, until at last I drove the physicians from me, and called in an apothecary from Nicolai who had cured an old woman of a malady similar to my own—cured her merely with a little hayseed. Well, he did me a great deal of good, for on the third day I broke into a sweat, and was able to leave my bed. Then my German doctors held another consultation, put on their spectacles, and told me that if I would go abroad, and take a course of the waters, the indisposition would finally pass away. ‘Why should it not?’ I thought to myself. So I had got things ready, and on the following day, a Friday, set out for here. I occupied a special compartment in the train, and where ever I had to change I found at the station bearers who were ready to carry me for a few coppers. You have nice quarters here,” she went on as she glanced around the room. “But where on earth did you get the money for them, my good sir? I thought that everything of yours had been mortgaged? This Frenchman alone must be your creditor for a good deal. Oh, I know all about it, all about it.”

“I-I am surprised at you, my dearest mother,” said the General in some confusion. “I-I am greatly surprised. But I do not need any extraneous control of my finances. Moreover, my expenses do not exceed my income, and we—”

“They do not exceed it? Fie! Why, you are robbing your children of their last kopeck—you, their guardian!”

“After this,” said the General, completely taken aback, “—after what you have just said, I do not know whether—”

“You do not know what? By heavens, are you never going to drop that roulette of yours? Are you going to whistle all your property away?”

This made such an impression upon the General that he almost choked with fury.

“Roulette, indeed? I play roulette? Really, in view of my position—Recollect what you are saying, my dearest mother. You must still be unwell.”

“Rubbish, rubbish!” she retorted. “The truth is that you cannot be got away from that roulette. You are simply telling lies. This very day I mean to go and see for myself what roulette is like. Prascovia, tell me what there is to be seen here; and do you, Alexis Ivanovitch, show me everything; and do you, Potapitch, make me a list of excursions. What is there to be seen?” again she inquired of Polina.

“There is a ruined castle, and the Shlangenberg.”

“The Shlangenberg? What is it? A forest?”

“No, a mountain on the summit of which there is a place fenced off. From it you can get a most beautiful view.”

“Could a chair be carried up that mountain of yours?”

“Doubtless we could find bearers for the purpose,” I interposed.

At this moment Theodosia, the nursemaid, approached the old lady with the General’s children.

“No, I don’t want to see them,” said the Grandmother. “I hate kissing children, for their noses are always wet. How are you getting on, Theodosia?”

“I am very well, thank you, Madame,” replied the nursemaid. “And how is your ladyship? We have been feeling so anxious about you!”

“Yes, I know, you simple soul—But who are those other guests?” the old lady continued, turning again to Polina. “For instance, who is that old rascal in the spectacles?”

“Prince Nilski, Grandmamma,” whispered Polina.

“Oh, a Russian? Why, I had no idea that he could understand me! Surely he did not hear what I said? As for Mr. Astley, I have seen him already, and I see that he is here again. How do you do?” she added to the gentleman in question.

Mr. Astley bowed in silence.

“Have you nothing to say to me?” the old lady went on. “Say something, for goodness’ sake! Translate to him, Polina.”

Polina did so.

“I have only to say,” replied Mr. Astley gravely, but also with alacrity, “that I am indeed glad to see you in such good health.” This was interpreted to the Grandmother, and she seemed much gratified.

“How well English people know how to answer one!” she remarked. “That is why I like them so much better than French. Come here,” she added to Mr. Astley. “I will try not to bore you too much. Polina, translate to him that I am staying in rooms on a lower floor. Yes, on a lower floor,” she repeated to Astley, pointing downwards with her finger.

Astley looked pleased at receiving the invitation.

Next, the old lady scanned Polina, from head to foot with minute attention.

“I could almost have liked you, Prascovia,” suddenly she remarked, “for you are a nice girl—the best of the lot. You have some character about you. I too have character. Turn round. Surely that is not false hair that you are wearing?”

“No, Grandmamma. It is my own.”

“Well, well. I do not like the stupid fashions of today. You are very good looking. I should have fallen in love with you if I had been a man. Why do you not get married? It is time now that I was going. I want to walk, yet I always have to ride. Are you still in a bad temper?” she added to the General.

“No, indeed,” rejoined the now mollified General.

“I quite understand that at your time of life—”

“Cette vieille est tombée en enfance,” De Griers whispered to me.

“But I want to look round a little,” the old lady added to the General. Will you lend me Alexis Ivanovitch for the purpose?

“As much as you like. But I myself—yes, and Polina and Monsieur de Griers too—we all of us hope to have the pleasure of escorting you.”

“Mais, madame, cela sera un plaisir,” De Griers commented with a bewitching smile.

“‘Plaisir’ indeed! Why, I look upon you as a perfect fool, monsieur.” Then she remarked to the General: “I am not going to let you have any of my money. I must be off to my rooms now, to see what they are like. Afterwards we will look round a little. Lift me up.”

Again the Grandmother was borne aloft and carried down the staircase amid a perfect bevy of followers—the General walking as though he had been hit over the head with a cudgel, and De Griers seeming to be plunged in thought. Endeavouring to be left behind, Mlle. Blanche next thought better of it, and followed the rest, with the Prince in her wake. Only the German savant and Madame de Cominges did not leave the General’s apartments.